

Constipation in Pregnancy



Constipation is common during pregnancy. It occurs when food residue moves too slowly through the bowel. This often happens during pregnancy due to:

- Hormonal changes
- Increased pressure on the bowel from the growing baby
- Iron supplements
- Not enough dietary fibre
- Not enough fluids
- Lack of exercise.

Whatever the cause of constipation, the effects are similar – an uncomfortable full feeling, bloating and stomach tenderness.

While hormonal changes, increased pressure on the bowel and iron supplements may be unavoidable during pregnancy, you can change the amount of fibre and fluids you consume and how much exercise you do. These three factors – **fibre, exercise and water (FEW)** – are the keys to taking the strain out of bowel movements.

Dietary fibre

Fibre helps move food residue quickly and easily through the bowel. Different plant foods contain different types of dietary fibre, so it is important to eat a variety of fibre-rich foods. Fruit, vegetables, grains, breads, cereal products, legumes, nuts and seeds are all good sources of dietary fibre.

The following foods are high in fibre:

- **Wholegrain and wholemeal products**
 - Wholemeal or multigrain breads, wholemeal crackers (for example Vita-Weat, Ryvita)
 - Breakfast cereals such as Weet-Bix, Vita Brits, Ready Wheats, muesli, oats and All-Bran.
 - Brown rice and wholemeal noodles.



● **Fruit and vegetables**

- Fresh, canned and dried fruit (such as prunes, figs, dates and sultanas). Fruit has fibre in the skin and membrane – try not to peel.
- Fresh and frozen vegetables. Vegetables with fibrous skins (beans, corn, peas) or stalks (spinach, broccoli) are rich in fibre. Leave skin on potatoes, carrots and pumpkin for extra fibre. Salad vegetables such as lettuce and cucumber are low in fibre.

● **Legumes**

- Dried beans and peas (such as kidney, garbanzo, borlotti, soy, mung, baked beans, mixed beans, and lentils).

How much fibre is enough?

Aim to include at least 30 grams of fibre, obtained from a variety of foods, in your diet.

Tips to boost fibre intake

- ✓ Choose wholemeal or wholegrain cereals and breads. Aim to eat at least four to six serves per day (1 serve = 2 slices bread, 1 cup cooked rice/pasta, 1 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup cereal).
- ✓ Eat four serves of fruit each day (1 serve = 1 apple, 1 banana, 1 cup diced fruit).
- ✓ Eat five serves of vegetables daily (1 serve = 1/2 cup cooked veg, 1 cup salad veg, 1/2 cup cooked dried peas, beans, lentils).
- ✓ Eat vegetables at each meal, for example mushrooms on toast for breakfast, salad at lunch and stir-fried vegetables at dinner.
- ✓ Try eating more dried beans, peas and lentils. For example, add lentils to soups, red kidney beans to casseroles and mixed beans to salads.

Increase your fibre intake slowly. Eating too much fibre too quickly can upset your bowel, resulting in pain and wind. Choose fibre-rich foods instead of taking fibre supplements or laxatives.

How much fibre do you eat?

Food	Serve size	Fibre (grams)
Breads, Cereals and Grains		
All-Bran	1/3 cup	6
Muesli	1/3 cup	4
Porridge oats – cooked	1 cup	3.5
Weet-Bix/Vita Brits	2 biscuits	3
Bran – unprocessed	1 tablespoons	2
Brown rice – cooked	1 cup	3
White rice – cooked	1 cup	1.5
Wholemeal pasta – cooked	1 cup	9.5
Pasta	1 cup	3
Wholemeal bread	1 slice	2
White bread	1 slice	1
White fibre-enriched bread	1 slice	1.5
Multigrain bread	1 slice	1.5
Vita-Weat, Ryvita	1 biscuit	0.5–1
Shredded wheatmeal	1 biscuit	0.5
Fruit		
Apple, banana	1 medium	3
Pear	1 medium	4
Orange	1 medium	2.5
Rockmelon	1 cup diced	1.5
Prunes	5	3
Dried apricots	5 halves	2
Dried figs	2	4
Sultanas	1 tablespoon	1
Vegetables		
Tomato	1 medium	1.5
Potato	1 medium with skin (120g)	5
Potato	1 medium no skin (120g)	1
Corn kernels	1/2 cup	3
Broccoli	1/2 cup (90 grams)	4
Spinach	1/2 cup (90 grams)	4
Peas cooked	1/2 cup (90 grams)	5.5
Legumes – cooked		
Baked beans	1/2 cup canned	6.5
Mixed beans	1/2 cup	6.0
Kidney beans	1/2 cup cooked	6.0
Lentils	1/2 cup cooked	3.5
Nuts		
Almonds	1/4 cup	4
Peanut butter	1 tablespoon	2.5

Exercise

Exercise is important during pregnancy. Physical activity has a stimulating effect on the intestines and moves the contents along, helping to prevent constipation.



Choose safe, enjoyable physical activities during pregnancy, such as brisk walking, swimming or antenatal exercise classes run by a physiotherapist.

Remember:

- Exercise in the cool part of the day, and drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration
- Avoid strong abdominal exercises, bouncing exercises and fast, jerky movements
- Learn to exercise your pelvic floor muscles and practice many times a day.

Water

Water and other fluids are necessary to overcome constipation. Try to drink eight glasses of fluids a day. A glass of warm water before breakfast helps some people beat constipation. Limit your intake of soft drink, cordial and fruit juice as these contain excess



kilojoules. If using fruit juice or cordial, mix it with large amounts of water. Drink caffeine in moderation.

Try this tasty recipe for a high-fibre snack:

Spicy Apple Muffins

(makes 12)

- 1½ cups wholemeal plain flour
- 2 teaspoons bicarbonate of soda
- 2 teaspoons mixed spice
- 1½ cups unprocessed bran
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 medium-sized Granny Smith apples
- 1 tablespoon sultanas
- 1 egg
- 1 cup low-fat milk
- 2 tablespoons oil

Preheat oven to 190°C.

Sift flour, soda and spice into large bowl.

Add bran and sultanas.

Remove cores but do not peel apples.

Chop in food processor.

Add egg, oil, honey and milk to apples.

Add apple mixture to dry ingredients.

Mix only until combined.

Spoon mixture into greased muffin tins, filling each to the top.

Bake in a 190°C oven for 25 minutes.



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