

# Healthy Living: Staying Regular<sup>1</sup>

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## Why is staying regular a concern for older adults?

Having a bowel movement fewer than three times a week is defined as constipation. This condition is very common in persons over age 65. Free-living older adults are less likely to be constipated than are persons living in nursing homes. Over time, chronic constipation can cause serious and painful conditions such as hemorrhoids and diverticular disease.

Diverticula are small outpouchings in the gut. When they get inflamed they can be quite painful.

## What causes constipation in older adults?

- Low fiber intake
- Certain medications
- Limited mobility

- Dehydration
- Chronic laxative abuse
- Ignoring the urge to defecate
- Decreased motility in the colon
- Decreased rectal sensation



Figure 1. Prunes (also called dried plums) contain dietary fiber as well as sorbitol, a sugar alcohol that has a laxative effect. Credits: HandmadePictures/iStock/Thinkstock.com

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## Which medications increase risk for constipation?

Several types of medications can cause constipation in some people. Ask your pharmacist for information about the side effects of each of the medications that you take. Here are some medications commonly associated with constipation:

- Antacids with aluminum or calcium
- Anticholinergics
- Antidepressants
- Antihistamines
- Calcium channel blockers
- Iron supplements (high doses)
- Diuretics
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs)

## What can I do to prevent constipation?

- Eat about 25–30 grams of fiber a day.
- Be as active as possible every day.
- Drink 6–8 cups or more of water and non-alcoholic drinks each day.
- Get into a routine for having a bowel movement; perhaps after breakfast.
- Take a fiber supplement if you are not able to eat enough dietary fiber each day. Talk to your doctor before using fiber supplements.



Figure 2. An apple a day, along with other fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, will help keep constipation away. Credits: TongRo Images/Thinkstock.com

## What are some examples of high-fiber foods?

Table 1. Examples of high-fiber foods

| Food   | Fiber (grams) |
|--|---------------|
| Baked beans, 1/3 cup*                                | 6–7           |
| Bran cereal, 1 ounce                                 | 5–13          |
| Wheat, shredded, 2 biscuits                          | 5             |
| Bran muffin, 1 medium                                | 2–4           |
| Fresh fruits, 1 medium                               | 2–4           |
| Broccoli, 1/2 cup<br>(All vegetables contain fiber.) | 3             |
| Nuts, 1/4 cup  | 2–3           |
| Whole wheat bread, 1 slice                           | 2             |
| Brown rice, 1/2 cup                                  | 2             |

\*Use canned beans for convenience.

## How can I add fiber to my diet?

Many tasty foods contain fiber! You can eat more fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds as snacks and in meals. Make substitutions like using whole grains instead of refined grains in baking.

Here are some more ideas:

- Choose high-fiber breakfast cereals.

- Add fresh, frozen, or canned fruits to low-fat milk or juice, and mix in the blender.
- Add extra vegetables to your favorite casserole or soup.
- Eat brown rice instead of white rice.
- Eat 8–10 almonds, pecans, cashews, or walnuts for a snack.
- Select high-fiber breads, cereals, and pastas.
- Purée vegetables in the blender and add to soups, quick-bread batter, or other dishes.
- Use beans and nuts more often as protein sources instead of meat.
- Enjoy a piece of fruit for a snack at least once every day.
- Sprinkle chopped nuts on your hot or cold cereal.
- <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>
- Constipation Myths, a UF/IFAS Extension publication <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fs155>

## Where can I get additional, reliable information?

The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your local UF/IFAS Extension office may have more written information and classes for you to attend. In Florida, you can find your local UF/IFAS Extension office online at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>.

A registered dietitian (RD) also can provide reliable information to you.

Visit the following Internet sites for more information:

- <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/seniorhealth.html>
- <http://www.nutrition.gov/>
- <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu>