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WHEN BOWEL MOTIONS GET TOO SOFT

Constipation because of hard stools is a common problem. The benefits of increasing dietary fibre to soften the stool are well known.

Sometimes the stool can be too soft. The consequences include powerful and distressing urges to pass gas, or to have a bowel action. This can be embarrassing and even result in episodes of incontinence. Equally upsetting are the difficulties in completing a bowel action. This may result in soiling or incontinence immediately after a bowel action, or in perianal itching and burning discomfort.

If you have these symptoms, and your motions are soft and frequent, you may benefit from a more solid stool consistency.

How can I make my bowel motions more solid?

The stool consistency is greatly influenced by what we eat and drink. The most obvious way to make the stool firmer is to reduce the food and drink that makes stools softer and to replace it with food that does not.

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| Fluids | You should drink no more than 1 litre of fluid per day. Excess fluid will tend to make your stool softer. |
| Alcohol | Alcohol may make the stool loose. Beer is often worse than other drinks and has a marked effect on bowel consistency secondary to the volume, yeast and cereal. Spirits and wine have less effect. |
| Caffeine | Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, cola drinks and chocolate. Caffeine stimulates the bowel and as the stool then passes through faster, less fluid is absorbed and the stools are looser. Caffeine also relaxes the anal sphincter. Exclude caffeine from your diet and see if you improve. |
| Artificial sweeteners | Artificial sweeteners are sugars that are not absorbed by your body. Some non-absorbable sugars are used as a laxative. Not surprisingly artificial sweeteners may make the stools loose, or even cause diarrhoea. It may be worth eliminating all artificial sweeteners and seeing if this helps. Artificial sweeteners are found in most foods and drinks branded as 'low calorie', including 'Diet' drinks and low sugar chewing gum. |
| Fibre | Although fibre is good, it can make incontinence worse as it keeps fluid in the bowel and makes the stools loose and more likely to leak. As fibre stimulates the bowel you have to visit the toilet more often. All vegetables tend to make motions softer, more frequent and make gas. Initially you should omit foods, which are obviously high in fibre. Capsicum, cabbage, brussel sprouts, onions, beans and broccoli have the most potent effect. Stone (apricots, plums, peaches) and dried (prunes and sultanas) fruits may also have a bad effect. Potato and pumpkin appear to have the least effect. Soluble, or digestible fibre (eg bananas, potatoes, rice, pasta, oatmeal) is less likely to cause a problem. |
| Other foods | Some people find specific foods make matters worse. Try excluding food in sequence and see how you are affected. Foods that are often implicated include smoked products, fatty and dairy foods. Spices, like curry, have a potent effect on the bowel. Less obvious spices (garlic, nutmeg, cinnamon) may also have such an effect. Other foods, such as arrowroot biscuits, marshmallow sweets and bananas can help. |

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| Medications | Many medications influence the stool consistency. |
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You need to carefully consider what you eat and drink. The exact combination of diet, fluid and drugs that suits you can only be determined by experimenting with different combinations. Experiment by excluding one type of food from your diet and monitoring the response. By definition, experiments may go wrong. You should not be afraid to try different combinations in order to find the one that suits you best. It should then be possible to find what affects your bowel.

Medications

Some medications will make your bowel habit worse. Examples include antibiotics, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories for arthritis, and some anti-depressants. Other drugs essential to well being, such as metformin for diabetics, also make the stool softer.

Other medicines can be used to solidify a liquid or soft stool, to make the bowel squeeze less strongly or to ensure the rectum empties fully. Some may increase the tone of the sphincter muscles.

Medicines may be used to solidify a liquid or soft stool, to make the bowel squeeze less strongly or to ensure the rectum empties fully. Some may increase the tone of the sphincter muscles. Some medications may be needed for a prolonged period, often years. If diarrhoea is present, treating this should lessen frequency and urgency and make incontinence less likely. If you are opening your bowels more than once each day and have soft or loose stool you may benefit from the use of medications.

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| Suppositories | It is important that your visit to the toilet completely empties your rectum. A suppository can be inserted as soon as you awake. You will usually be able to hold it for 20-30 minutes. This will then give a good bowel action that should not require you to linger on the toilet, nor require you to strain. The rectum will then be empty and will not contain any stool to leak out during the day. People in whom passive leakage is a major problem may choose to slow the bowel down so there are no bowel actions without the help of suppositories or an enema. These can be used to empty the bowel once every few days. |
| Loperamide (Imodium) Codeine phosphate | <p>These drugs slow the passage of stool through the colon. More water is then absorbed and the stool becomes firmer and so less likely to leak. It is usually best to take these medicines before food rather than after.</p> <p>Loperamide (Imodium or Gastrostop) makes the stool firmer and has a potent effect, but is barely absorbed into the bloodstream. There is no tendency to develop tolerance or addiction. The ideal dose needs to be individually determined as it is difficult to predict the dose that will be effective, but not cause constipation.</p> <p>Codeine phosphate has a similar, but more powerful effect. It may produce sedation and is not usually first choice.</p> <p>Some people find one or other of these drugs works best for them, or that a lower dose, but in combination, is better. You should experiment to find the regime that suits you best.</p> |
| Bulking agents | If the stools are very loose, especially if there seems to be a lot of mucus, medications such as Fybogel or Metamucil can absorb excess fluid and produce a more formed stool. |
