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CONSTIPATION

This sheet gives you general advice about the causes and treatment of constipation. It is not a substitute for specific advice from your doctor.

What is constipation?

Constipation is a constellation of symptoms. It may include one, or several, of the following:- infrequent defaecation, the passage of hard stools, difficulty in opening the bowels (straining) and painful defaecation. It is important that the exact cause of constipation is determined as the treatment may vary.

The average frequency of defaecation in the general population varies from once every two or three days to twice per day. It is important not to become dominated by your bowel habit. You are not required to empty your bowels on a daily basis. Not to defaecate each day is not 'failure', but normal.

Three simple goals.

Regular exercise.

Exercise promotes bowel activity. This does not have to be 'heavy' exercise. Walking, swimming, dancing and cycling are just some of the exercises that are suitable. Aim for at least 30 minutes a day.

A healthy diet

Many modern foods lack the fibre found in more traditional diets. This results in a hard, small stool that is difficult to propel through the large bowel. Such stools are a contributing factor to many cause of constipation. A separate high fibre advice sheet is available. You need about 25-30 grams of fibre per day

Generous fluid intake

Fibre binds water into the stool, making it softer and bulkier. It is then easier to pass. You must ensure that you drink plenty of water. Drink at least 1.5 to 2 litres each day, more in summer. Note that fruit juices and many fizzy drinks (e.g. colas) are high in calories.

Toilet habit.

Prolonged visits to the bathroom with straining are very detrimental to the pelvic floor. Remember the seven 'T's - Total Toilet Time To be Two To Three minutes. If you have not opened your bowels within three minutes, terminate that visit and try again on another occasion, even another day. You only need to go when you really need to go!

Medication.

Initially an artificial bulking agent may be prescribed to supplement your diet whilst you increase your fibre intake. Normally a husk based agent such as Metamucil will

be recommended. In some patients a more powerful stimulating laxative is required. Epsom salts or a similar osmotic laxative are preferred. Many patients will be able to stop laxatives once they have adjusted to the simple life style goals.