

Bowel Retraining: Suggested Guidelines For Patients

What is bowel retraining?

Bowel retraining is a way for people who suffer from constipation to get back normal bowel movements. Bowel retraining can take anywhere from 1 or 2 weeks to 5 months. The time depends on how long you have been struggling with constipation. Once your bowels start working, eating high fibre food and drinking lots of water will help you maintain a normal bowel function.

Bowel retraining can help with these symptoms of constipation:

- hard stool
- straining to pass stool
- feelings of incomplete emptying
- bowel movements less than three times per week

Before you start bowel retraining, visit your family doctor for a complete physical examination. Your doctor will be able to guide you through the process to ensure that you get the best care possible.

How to retrain your bowels

Eat more foods that are high in fibre

Dietary fibre is a part of plant foods that your body cannot digest. Because it cannot be digested, the fibre increases the bulk of your stool (makes it bigger).

This helps your stool move through your bowels. The best way to get enough fibre is to eat a variety of foods every day. A healthy diet includes 25 to 38 grams of fibre from whole grains, wheat bran, peas and beans, and fruits and vegetables. This amount of fibre will keep your bowels regular. As you start eating more fibre, at first you may feel bloated and have more gas. This is normal. To help with this, increase your fibre intake gradually. Your body will adjust.

Drink lots of fluids

As you start to eat more fibre it is important to drink enough fluids. The fibre in your food will absorb water. If you don't drink enough, eating more fibre can make you more constipated! Try to drink 6 to 8 cups of water every day. Using water and fibre is the best way to help your bowels become more regular.

Choose a regular time every day for bowel movement

Sit on the toilet each day for 10 to 20 minutes after breakfast. Pick a time when you won't be interrupted. Don't strain. If you do not have a movement during the allotted time, get off the toilet and go about your day.

**If fibre and fluids do not help,
take Milk of Magnesia®**

If you don't have a bowel movement within 2 days of starting your water and fibre intake, drink 1 – 2 tablespoons (15 to 30 mL) of Milk of Magnesia at bedtime.

**If Milk of Magnesia does not help,
try PegLyte®**

If you do not have a bowel movement after 3 days of taking Milk of Magnesia you can use PegLyte. You do not need a prescription. Ask your pharmacist for this solution. It contains polyethylene glycol (say 'pol-ee-eth-uh-leen glahy-kawl') and electrolytes (say 'ih-lek-truh-lahyts'). These ingredients draw more water into your bowels. They make your stool softer and easier to pass. This solution is not a stimulant. Your intestinal muscles will not become dependent on it.

Start by drinking one cup (250 ml) of PegLyte each day. If you have not had a bowel movement after 2 days, add another cup. You can take one cup in the morning and one cup at night. Do not drink more than 4 cups each day. If you do not have a bowel movement by day 5 of taking PegLyte, talk to your family doctor, pharmacist or nurse in your program.

Do not take other laxatives

While you are retraining your bowels it is very important not to take any laxatives. This includes Correctol®, Bisacodyl, (Dulcolax®) and sennosides. If you take these you will not be able to have a bowel movement without them. Your bowels will become dependent on them. Your constipation will continue.

If you take too many laxatives you can have some dangerous complications:

The electrolytes in your body can become unbalanced. Electrolytes control your nerves and muscles and your blood pressure. If they are unbalanced you may have muscle weakness and kidney damage. Your heartbeat may become irregular. This can be life threatening.

If you take too many laxatives your bowels can stop working entirely. You will need more and more laxatives to have a bowel movement. You will no longer be able to have a bowel movement without them.

You may not feel well when you start bowel retraining

You may feel bloated and constipated until your bowels start working normally again. Some people have swelling in their lower legs when they start bowel retraining. This swelling relates to how dehydrated you were before you started. To reduce the swelling, you can raise your legs when you are sitting or lying in bed. Use an ottoman when you are sitting or pile up pillows on the bed to support your legs.

Questions?

If you have any questions about bowel retraining, talk to your doctor or to a nurse in your program.

This material has been reviewed and approved by patients, families and staff.

