



Management of Constipation

Evidence Based Information Sheets for Consumers

What is evidence based health information?

Just as a detective searches for evidence to solve a crime, so too do health professionals look for evidence to guide their practice. The detective must have evidence to support their case. In a similar fashion, the health care professional must have evidence to support their proposed course of treatment. They search for information that will help them to provide the most effective or beneficial form of care to their patients. Due to the wealth of information available to them, the process of discovering which information is the best can be difficult and time consuming. It would take an enormous amount of time for your doctor to sift through the large amounts of research and information available to them on a particular topic. This is where the Joanna Briggs Institute comes into play. We conduct the 'detective' work, providing them (and you) with the best available evidence.

Evidence Reliability

The evidence related to the topic of each consumer publication produced by the Joanna Briggs Institute is assessed for reliability and quality. We do not rate a procedure or treatment, but the evidence (or research) that is available to support it.

Evidence can play a critical role in any investigation and it is important for detectives to recognise evidence that will provide 'reliable' information to aid in the investigation. This is also the case when assessing health information, as some types of evidence are more reliable than others.

For Joanna Briggs Institute evidence based information for consumers, you can be assured that the best available evidence is utilised. If you would like more information about research and levels of evidence, please contact the Joanna Briggs Institute or visit the research page of our consumer web site.

"The procedures described in this pamphlet must only be used by people who have appropriate expertise in the field to which the procedure relates. The applicability of any information must be established before relying on it. While care has been taken to ensure that this pamphlet summarises available research and expert consensus, any loss, damage, cost, expense or liability suffered or incurred as a result of reliance on these procedures (whether arising in contract, negligence or otherwise) is, to the extent permitted by law, excluded".

What does this mean for consumers?

As consumers of health care it is important to know that your treatment is being based on the best available evidence. It is also important that you are provided with all of the information in order to have greater independence in relation to your own health care decisions and to be involved in the decision making process.

Further information

The Joanna Briggs Institute Consumer Information Program provides up to date literature reviews to ensure your information is based on the best available evidence. The Institute also produces systematic reviews and Best Practice Information sheets aimed at clinicians and health professionals. This means you are provided with the same high standard of publications based on the same information as those working directly in the field.

Contact details

The Joanna Briggs Institute has collaborating centres throughout Australia and overseas. If you would like more information on the Institute, its publications or wish to contact a Joanna Briggs Institute collaborating centre near you, please visit our web site:

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The best available evidence...

for older adults

About Constipation

The purpose of this information sheet is to summarise previous research and present the best available evidence on the prevention and management of constipation in older adults.

Constipation refers to difficult, or strained, and infrequent bowel movements experienced over a long period of time. Symptoms of constipation include hard/dry faeces, bloating and abdominal pain. Definitions of normal bowel function vary widely, but a frequency of between three times per day to three times per week has been suggested as the normal range.

Risk factors

Constipation is commonly viewed as one of the problems of ageing. However, healthy, active older adults often experience normal bowel function. The link between age and constipation is more likely to be a result of other contributing factors such as fluid intake, diet, restricted mobility and the environment.

Other risk factors that may result in the development of constipation include anxiety, depression and some medications (such as sedatives or anti-depressants).

If you experience intense abdominal pain, have blood in your faeces, or have bowel movements less than three times a week it is important to seek medical advice as this may be an indication of a more serious illness.

References

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3. Mertz HR. Constipation. *Current Opinion in Gastroenterology* 1997;13:28-33.
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Prevention and Treatment

There are many factors that influence the development of constipation and so it is important that treatment is tailored to the needs of each person.

Diet, Supplements and Exercise

Fibre improves bowel function by adding bulk and softening the stool. Foods that are high in fibre include cereals, breads, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds. When you increase fibre intake you should also make sure that you also increase your fluid intake.

While dietary supplements, such as prune supplements or fruit mixtures and concentrates are commonly used to treat constipation in the hospital setting, their effectiveness has not been evaluated by research.

Regular exercise should form a part of any attempt to treat or prevent constipation. Exercises such as walking, swimming, running or any other physical activity within your personal capabilities should help.

Constipation that is not relieved by changes in diet, fluid intake and exercise may require medication. It is recommended that if medication is required you should seek the advice of your doctor or pharmacist.

Enemas and Suppositories

Enemas and suppositories are used for the treatment of acute constipation, for example to clear the rectum and restore normal function prior to starting a bowel management program. Enemas should be used carefully due to the risk associated with reactions to the solutions used or injury that may occur when they are administered.

Laxatives

Laxatives are commonly used to treat and prevent constipation in older adults. They come in many different forms and work in different ways, so it is important to work out which one will work for you. It is important to note that use of laxatives over a long period of time may actually cause constipation, so it is essential to consult your doctor or pharmacist about the cause of your constipation.

The evidence suggests...

Diet and Fluid Intake

Diet plays an important role in constipation.

- a high fibre diet is recommended
- drinking enough fluid each day is important. For example, 6 - 8 drinks of fluid each day, and expert opinion suggests clear fluids are better than tea or coffee
- if high fibre food choices are unsuitable the dietary supplements may be helpful

Exercise

Lack of regular exercise is a common risk factor for the development of constipation, therefore exercise should form part of any lifestyle change aimed at preventing constipation.

Effective Bowel Habits

Some toilet habits may contribute to the development of constipation. Therefore, some form of bowel training may help. Bowel training may include:

- going to the toilet after meals
- going to the toilet at a regular time each day (for example in the mornings)
- making sure the toilet is the correct height, and using seat raisers or foot stools as needed; and
- sitting with both feet supported on floor or foot stool, leaning forward slightly to relax pelvic floor muscles, as this will help minimise straining