

GUT INSTINCT

WHEN NATURE DOESN'T CALL - UNDERSTANDING CONSTIPATION

Constipation is a common digestive complaint that affects people of all ages. When your bowels aren't moving the way they should, it can impact your mood, energy, and even your confidence. While occasional constipation may not be serious, chronic or severe cases should not be ignored. We take a look at how to recognise constipation, what can cause it, and importantly, tips on how to get things moving again!

What is constipation?

Constipation typically involves:

- Fewer than three bowel movements per week
- Hard lumpy stools
- Straining or pain during bowel movements
- A sensation of incomplete emptying



Common causes of constipation

1. Low-Fibre Diet

Fibre adds bulk to the stool and helps it pass more easily through the bowel. Lack of fibre is one of the leading causes of constipation.

Tip: Eat more whole grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables and less processed foods

2. Inadequate Fluid Intake

Water helps soften stool, making it easier to pass.

Tip: Drink at least 1.5-2 litres of water per day, especially if increasing fibre intake

3. Lack of Physical Activity

Exercise stimulates intestinal activity. A sedentary lifestyle slows down the digestive process.

Tip: Even a 20-30 minute walk daily can support regular bowel movements.

4. Changes in Routine

Travel, shift work, illness, or disruptions in sleep and meal times can affect your bowel habits. The digestive system thrives on routine, and disruptions can lead to sluggish bowel movements.

Tip: Try to maintain a consistent eating and toileting schedule, even when travelling.

5. Ignoring the Urge to Go

Ignoring the natural urge to have a bowel movement can lead to harder stools and reduced sensation over time.

Tip: Respond to your body's signals as soon as possible to maintain healthy bowel habits.

6. Hormonal Fluctuations (Especially in Women)

Hormones have a powerful effect on the digestive system. In women, fluctuations in progesterone and estrogen—particularly during the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, or menopause can slow down bowel motility. Many women notice they become constipated in the days leading up to their period, when progesterone levels are at their highest. Similarly, hormonal changes in pregnancy often lead to sluggish bowels.

Tip: Eat kiwifruit as they are a good source of vitamin C, which supports hormone production and regulation, plus they are an excellent source of fibre.

7. Medications

Many common medications can contribute to constipation, including:

- Painkillers (especially opioids)
- Antacids containing calcium or aluminium
- Iron supplements
- Certain antidepressants
- Blood pressure medications (like calcium channel blockers)

Tip: If you suspect a medication is causing constipation, speak with your doctor. Never stop taking prescribed medication without medical advice.

8. Medical Conditions

Several health conditions can affect the muscles, nerves, or hormones involved in digestion:

- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) – particularly the constipation-predominant type
- Diabetes – which can damage nerves that control the gut
- Hypothyroidism – a low thyroid slows down metabolism and bowel function
- Neurological disorders like Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis

Tip: Keep your doctor informed of any change in symptoms

LET’S GET THINGS MOVING WITH THIS RECIPE

Chia seed Pudding topped with Kiwifruit

Kiwifruit and chia seeds are excellent sources of dietary fibre. Two tablespoons of chia seeds a day can work wonders for constipation, as can two kiwifruit/day. Chia seeds swallowed in a glass of water or in a pudding works better, as the seeds remain whole. When the seeds are ground up, as they often are in smoothies, it isn’t as effective in relieving constipation.

Ingredients (Serves 2)

- ¼ cup chia seeds
- 1 cup milk (dairy or plant-based)
- 1 tbsp maple syrup or honey (optional)
- ½ tsp vanilla extract (optional)
- 2 ripe kiwifruits, peeled and sliced

Instructions

1. Mix chia seeds, milk, sweetener, & vanilla in a bowl or jar. Stir well.
2. Chill in the fridge for 2+ hours or overnight until thickened.
3. Layer pudding and sliced kiwifruit in small glasses.
4. Top with extras like almonds or berries if desired.

