

Constipation and Parkinson's Disease

Introduction

Constipation affects many people with Parkinson's disease (PD) and may be a very early symptom of the disease, sometimes beginning even before motor symptoms appear. Constipation can significantly decrease quality of life, causing abdominal discomfort, a loss of appetite, bloating, and, if not corrected, can even lead to serious consequences like bowel impaction.

PD slows the muscle movements of the gut, leading to constipation. Decreased fluid intake, poor dietary habits, decreased exercise, and medication side effects can all exacerbate the problem.

The best treatment approach is to prevent constipation using diet and lifestyle changes.

Diet and Lifestyle

Changes in diet and lifestyle may take some time before they restore regularity, so be patient. Here are some suggestions:

- Eat meals at the same time each day.
- Increase fluids in your diet. Drinking enough water is important to prevent constipation, especially when taking fiber supplements.
- Add more fiber to your diet. A general guide is that half your plate should be filled with fruits and vegetables. Whole grains are also a good source of fiber (more details about specific foods below).
- Avoid certain foods. For some people, certain foods increase constipation and should be limited. These include fried foods, meats, bananas, sugary foods, and white flour.
- Exercise and remain as active as possible. Increasing your activity level is good for general health and for reducing constipation. A physical therapist can recommend appropriate exercises. Consult with your doctor before beginning any new exercise program.
- Drink warm liquids with breakfast.
- Establish a fixed time every day for bowel movements.
- Never put off the urge to move your bowels.

Determine Your Daily Fiber Intake

Use **Table 1** to estimate your current daily fiber intake. Increase your intake weekly, by 5 grams per day until you reach the recommended daily intake of 20 to 35 grams:

Table 1: Example of Fiber-rich Food Choices

Food Group Serving Size	Approx. Fiber/Serv. (grams)
Whole Fruit 1 medium, 1 cup chopped	2
Vegetables 1 cup cut, 2 cups raw leafy	4
Whole Grains 1 slice bread, ½ cup cooked rice/pasta/oatmeal	2
Beans, Peas and Lentils ½ cup cooked	8-10
Nuts and Nut Butters ¼ cup nuts, 2 Tbsp. nut butter	2
Whole Grain Breakfast Cereals See Nutrition Facts Label	3

Helpful Foods to Prevent Constipation

Fiber is an essential component of a healthy diet and the lack of fiber is the most common cause of constipation. Some common fiber sources include fresh and dried fruits, vegetables, seeds, beans, whole wheat and whole-grain products, bran, oatmeal, and brown rice.

A natural recipe to increase dietary fiber involves combining 2 parts of unprocessed wheat bran, 1 part applesauce, 1 part prune juice (for example 1 cup, ½ cup, and ½ cup, respectively), and refrigerating the mixture. You can take 1–2 tablespoons daily for one week. If needed, you can increase by 1 tablespoon a week (make a new mixture every week). Stool frequency and gas may increase the first few weeks but will usually adjust after one month of using this mixture.

There is also evidence that adding probiotics to your diet may improve constipation. Probiotics refer to foods or nutritional supplements that contain micro-organisms (such as bacteria or yeast) meant to support health. Many yogurts contain probiotics, although some (those that are heated during processing) do not. Look for a yogurt with active or live cultures. Kefir is a fermented, probiotic milk drink that can also be added to your diet. Probiotics can also be ingested in powder or pill form. Speak with your doctor before trying these options.

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Medications for Constipation

When diet and lifestyle changes are not sufficient to treat constipation, there are many over-the-counter treatments available. See **Table 2** for examples of each class of medication. As always, talk with your doctor about the best option for you to try, and the frequency with which to use these various medications. Please also note that certain medications that you might already be taking can cause constipation, so make sure to review your current medications with your doctor. Pay particular attention if constipation worsens after a new medication is started.

Here are the types of over-the-counter remedies for constipation that are available:

- **Fiber supplements** add bulk to the stool and are the safest and most naturally acting treatment for constipation. These products are not habit-forming and can be used daily to help prevent and treat constipation. Make sure to take these with an 8-ounce glass of water. Increasing fiber intake too quickly may result in gas, bloating, and upset stomach, so make sure to increase fiber slowly.
- **Stool softeners** allow more water to enter the stool, making it easier to pass.
- **Stimulants** cause your intestines to contract and thereby propel the stool through the gastrointestinal tract. These should not be used on a regular basis but can be very effective for occasional use.
- **Osmotic laxatives** act by drawing water into the colon from the cells that line the colon. Polyethylene glycol or Miralax® is often recommended. Talk with your doctor about whether it is safe to take polyethylene glycol daily.
- **Lubricants** enable stool to move through your colon more easily.

Table 2: Over-the-Counter Medications Used to Treat Constipation

Medication Class	Examples Generic Name (brand)
Fiber supplements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psyllium (Metamucil®, Fiberall®) • Inulin (Fiber-sure®, Fiber Choice®) • Polycarbophil (FiberCon®, Fiber Lax®) • Methylcellulose (Citrucel®) • Wheat dextrin (Benefiber®)
Stool softeners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Docusate (Colace®)
Stimulants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bisacodyl (Dulcolax®) • Senna (Senokot®)
Osmotics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polyethylene glycol (Miralax®) • Magnesium citrate • Magnesium hydroxide (Milk of Magnesia®)
Lubricants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mineral oil

There are also suppositories (glycerin and bisacodyl) and enemas (bisacodyl, mineral oil) that are available for treatment of constipation.

Prescription Medication

If over-the-counter products are not sufficient, talk to your doctor about trying a prescription medication for chronic constipation. These medications include lactulose, linaclotide, lubiprostone, plecanatide, and prucalopride.

Although constipation can be a prominent non-motor feature of PD, there are many strategies to try that can bring relief and help limit its effects on your quality of life. As always, discuss with your doctor which options are best for your personal situation.

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