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Epidemic Numbers of People Suffering From Constipation

By Dr. Mercola | August 30th, 2017

For most people, an occasional bout of constipation is a minor aggravation. However, this is not the case for the nearly 15 percent of the U.S. population suffering from chronic constipation. This means 63 million people have difficulty passing hard, dry, lumpy stool, suffer from feeling bloated, have abdominal pain or feel as if there is something stuck in their rectum or intestines.

For many, the topic of their bowel movements is a private matter. This makes understanding and learning about the actual mechanics of how stool is produced and eliminated difficult, as many don't find it a topic they want to discuss, even with their physicians.

The number of stools you have each week is closely linked to the types of food you eat, the amount of exercise you get and your hydration status. While many people may have a bowel movement once a day, the normal amount ranges between four times each week to several times a day. What differentiates infrequent stools and constipation is the consistency of the stool, the difficulty in passing it and other symptoms you may experience, such as bloating or feeling full.

Unfortunately, the number of people who suffer from chronic constipation is rising, leading to a characterization of the condition as a "silent epidemic" as those who suffer often suffer in silence.

Number of People Suffering From Chronic Constipation on the Rise

A recent survey by the American Gastroenterological Association found 16 percent of Americans suffer from chronic constipation and nearly 33 percent over age 60 experience the condition. This leads to nearly 6 million visits to the doctor's office or clinic, and nearly 700,000 visits to an emergency room every year. Although the condition is normally treated on an outpatient basis, the number of people admitted to the hospital since 1997 has doubled.

One recent study estimated that if the 6 percent of Americans suffering from functional constipation incorporated natural lifestyle changes to improve their condition, \$12.7 billion in direct medical costs could be avoided annually. The researchers felt this was a conservative estimate as it did not account for lost wages or productivity.

While the recent survey found an increasing number of people suffered from chronic constipation, it was not a study that evaluated the causes behind the problem. There are several controllable factors common to a modern lifestyle that contribute to an increasing risk, and factors over which you have no control. For instance, the number of people who suffer from constipation rises significantly with age. This may be related to both lifestyle choices, such as diet and exercise, and to age-related neurogenic dysfunction. Other factors that influence your risk include:

- Iron supplements
- Drinking insufficient amount of fluid
- Poor nutrition leading to vitamin deficiency
- Certain medications, such as opiates, antidepressants, antacids and anti-hypertensives

Significant Health Problems Linked to Chronic Constipation

Chronic constipation is also related to at least one brain disorder: Parkinson's disease. A number of studies have demonstrated a link between your gut health and your psychological health. A link between an unbalanced microbiome (one symptom of which is constipation) and Parkinson's disease may be related to proteins from the gut that accumulate in the

brain. In one study, 21 days after specific proteins were injected into the stomach and intestines of mice they were found to have migrated as far as the vagus nerve

Constipation may also increase your risk of kidney diseases. Researchers reviewed medical records of over 3.5 million U.S. veterans and followed their care for seven years. At the start of the study each participant had normal kidney function. Although a causative relationship could not be proven with the method used in the study, those with constipation had a 13 percent increased risk of kidney disease and 9 percent increased risk of kidney failure.

Researchers have also found suffering from constipation may increase your risk of anal fissures, stool incontinence, hemorrhoids and urological disorders. The seriousness of the symptoms may vary, depending upon the severity of your constipation. An association has also been found between people suffering rectal prolapse, a condition where part of the large intestines slips out of the anus, and constipation.

Another factor connected with constipation is back pain. In some cases, back pain may result in the use of pain medications like opiates that slow your intestinal tract and lead to constipation. In other cases, back pain is the result of your constipation. For instance, irritable bowel syndrome or a fecal impaction may lead to back pain.

Steer Clear of Laxatives

Constipation is a symptom of other conditions and not a disease or illness process itself. Thus, treating just the symptom may mean you're overlooking another more serious problem. Many people turn to over-the-counter laxatives to immediately relieve the discomfort, but this may have additional consequences that hinder your recovery.

If you must use something to immediately relieve constipation, consider trying a glycerin suppository that doesn't contain any stimulants. The suppository often produces results within two hours and works by drawing water into your large intestines directly where your hard stool is located, softening it enough to evacuate your bowels.

Magnesium May Help Constipation and Protect Against Disease

One of the most popular short-term natural supplements that is effective against constipation is magnesium. Magnesium is an essential mineral and a cofactor used in multiple enzymes. A deficiency is associated with poor absorption of vitamin D and an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis and diabetes. Supplementation is being used to treat migraine headaches, hypertension and asthma.

Magnesium is important to mitochondrial health, and in the production of energy in every cell in your body. It is estimated that 50 years ago people routinely received nearly 500 milligrams (mg) of magnesium every day from their food. Today, with soil depletion and poor nutritional habits, many may only receive from 100 mg to 300 mg per day. Although organic, unprocessed foods are your best bet; the amount you receive will depend upon the soil the plants were grown in.

The recommended dietary allowance (RDA) for magnesium is between 310 to 420 mg per day, dependent upon your age and sex. However, these amounts are based on reducing your potential for deficiency and don't necessarily address the amount you need to maintain optimal health. Some researchers believe you may need between 600 to 900 mg per day. Dr. Carolyn Dean, author of "The Magnesium Miracle," recommends that you use your body as a marker for your ideal personal dose.

Begin by taking 200 mg of oral magnesium citrate each day and gradually increase the amount until you develop slightly loose stools. Magnesium citrate has a mild laxative effect — whatever your body doesn't absorb will affect your intestines as it is flushed out through your stool, which helps you identify your personal cutoff point. There is ample evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of using magnesium to naturally improve constipation.

Magnesium comes in several forms including chelate, threonate, citrate and sulfate. Citrate is the form that has the most effect on your intestinal tract and helps produce loose stools. However, if you are taking magnesium supplements for other health reasons, my personal preference is magnesium threonate as it appears to more effectively penetrate your cell membranes and boost your mitochondrial health, thus boosting your energy level.

Try Squatting to Enhance Elimination

Sitting on your toilet may be comfortable, but placement of your knees and upper legs at 90 degrees to your abdomen actually pinches off your anal canal and makes having a bowel movement more difficult. On the other hand, when you squat, your knees are brought closer to your abdomen, which changes the relationship of your rectum and sphincter, positioning your organs and muscles in a way that relaxes your rectum. This maximizes the efficiency of your evacuation.

In this position, muscles around your rectum and pubic bones relax. This encourages complete emptying of your rectum and cecum without straining. It also reduces the potential for stagnation of stool in your lower intestines and subsequent accumulation of toxins that impact the growth of your gut microbiome. In many non-Westernized cultures people routinely squat to evacuate their bowels and don't sit on a toilet.

It is interesting to note that in cultures where people squat daily, people don't have the high prevalence of bowel diseases experienced in countries where toilets are commonplace. Squatting without support is challenging when you haven't grown up squatting on a daily basis. A simple and inexpensive method of achieving good body position is to use a small foot stool. This places your organs and muscles in a more natural position and enables easier evacuation.

Fiber, Movement and Other Natural Ways of Reducing Constipation

Swap out processed foods for whole, high-fiber foods, such as leafy green vegetables, almonds, squash and broccoli. These foods feed your gut microbiome, reduce your vulnerability to infection and promote softer stools that keep your intestinal walls intact.

Remove gluten, artificial sweetener and sugar from your diet as they all damage your intestinal tract.

Regular exercise can also help reduce constipation. The physical movement helps increase the motility in your digestive tract and can stimulate the urge to have a bowel movement.

When you feel the urge to have a bowel movement, don't wait. The longer the stool sits in your colon, the more water is removed and the more difficult it is to pass.

Consider using a foot stool to get into a squatting position to have a bowel movement. This will strengthen the muscles around your rectum and encourages a complete emptying of your bowel without straining.

Stay well hydrated with clean, pure water.

Avoid pharmaceutical drugs that change the speed of your bowel function or cause GI disruptions, such as opiate pain medications, antidepressants, antibiotics, antacids and laxatives. Instead, take a daily probiotic.

Address your emotional challenges and life changes using tools, such as Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT).