



CONSTIPATION

Fact Sheet

For people living with ALS, constipation is one of the most frequent digestive complaints. It is uncomfortable and unhealthy and can cause a decrease in appetite leading to decreased food intake, weight loss and malnutrition – which can be detrimental to their health.

Constipation is defined as infrequent (usually three times or less weekly) and difficult passage of hard, dry stools. Both frequency and consistency of bowel movements are important.

Some possible causes of constipation:

- decreased physical activity because of decrease in muscle strength and fatigue
- decreased dietary fibre intake because of changes in food choices because of taste or chewing or swallowing difficulty
- decreased fluid intake because of difficulty swallowing liquids or to decrease frequency of urination due to the need for more assistance going to the bathroom
- weakness in abdominal or pelvic muscles so less able to push
- medications to control saliva (e.g., amitriptyline, atropine) or pain (e.g., codeine) which dry up stool
- slowing of stomach emptying or bowel transit time

Management of constipation involves addressing the underlying problem:

- gradual increase in fibre intake including whole grain products (bread and cereals, pasta, brown rice), vegetables and fruit, legumes (dried peas, beans and lentils), fibre supplements (bran, psyllium)
- avoid dehydration by increasing fluid intake including any non-alcoholic beverages, such as water, juices, milk, thickened liquids— a liquid diet does not always contain much water, so drink lots of water
- regular mealtimes
- good bowel habits including not suppressing the urge for a bowel movement (“heeding the call of nature”)
- careful use of laxatives including bulk forming laxatives (Metamucil), stool softeners (e.g. Colace), osmotic laxatives (e.g. lactulose, Miralax) and if required stimulant laxatives (e.g. Senekot)
- control of medications including dosage and timing

Remember that regular digestion and elimination are important in your body’s overall health and that each person’s “regular” is a little different. Discuss your diet, medications and physical activity with your medical team and family to find the right combinations for you.

By: Elaine Cawadiaz RD
Clinical Dietitian
ALS Clinic
The Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre