

Colon and Rectal Surgery

Bowel Management Program

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Overview

Regular bowel function includes the easy passage of bowel movements and avoiding constipation and diarrhea. Following the suggestions in this brochure will improve bowel habits in the large majority of individuals.

A major cause of poor bowel function is a Western type of diet with low fiber and roughage intake and a higher fat content. The colon's major function is to absorb water and change the liquid stool that enters from the small intestine into a solid stool that is passed out. The colon is very efficient at removing fluid from the bowel contents and will actually remove 9 parts out of 10 as water and electrolytes. If too much water is removed, then the stools become small and hard and are difficult to pass. If not enough water is removed, stools may be loose and diarrhea.

Dietary fiber and fiber supplements or bulking agents function by absorbing water and holding it in the stools, much in the same way as a sponge soaks up water. Therefore, the stools remain moist and soft, instead of becoming dried out as they pass through the colon. Fiber is also good for diarrhea or loose stools because it soaks up the extra water and keeps the stools in a more solid form. Thus a diet high in fiber is good for both diarrhea and constipation.

High Fiber Diet

A high fiber diet is recommended on a routine basis. You should attempt to include fiber-rich foods in your daily intake. These include a wide variety of foods. The best source of fiber is wheat bran, although oat, rye and other cereals are also good sources. Bran comes from the outer husk of the grain kernel, whereas the germ is from the core. Thus, the product, "wheat germ," does not contain bran. White flour and wheat germ have had the bran milled away. Bran cereal, whole wheat breads and miller's bran are good sources of fiber.

A bowl of bran cereal that has 5 to 7 grams of dietary fiber per serving along with a glass of milk and/or juice is a good way to start the day. Each product has the amount of dietary fiber and the number of calories per serving printed on the side of the box. Alternatives include a bran muffin or mixing 2 or 3 tablespoons of miller's bran in hot cereal. Another information sheet describes the contents of a high fiber diet in greater detail. No one knows exactly how much fiber is enough; however, 25 to 30 grams per day is recommended.

Fiber Supplements

Fiber supplements or bulking agents function in the same way as dietary fiber and bran. They are taken by mouth once or twice a day and are not absorbed. Most of these products contain psyllium which is a seed product. There are also several forms of hydrophilic colloids which also absorb water. Many pharmacies and grocery stores have their own generic brands which are often much less expensive than the name brands. They may come as powders, tablets, or wafers. Some examples are Konsyl, Metamucil, Citrucel, Benefiber and Fibercon.

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Powder form:

Mix one tablespoon or one pre-measured package in a glass of water or juice and drink. One wafer is equal to one tablespoon of the powder.

_____ each morning

_____ each morning and each evening

Tablet form:

Swallow 4 to 6 tablets with 1-2 large glasses of liquid.

_____ each morning

_____ each morning and each evening

Fluids

Since the major function of fiber is to hold fluid in the stool, it is important to take enough water and other liquids during the day. Like a sponge, fiber will become hard and stiff if it dries out and does not have enough water in it. At least 6 to 8 glasses of water and other liquids should be taken each day.

Stool Softeners

These agents act to lubricate the stools and allow them to pass more easily. They act by increasing the amount of water in the bowel and thereby softening the stools.

Docusate – The most commonly used agents contain docusate. Several forms are available including Colace (100mg tablet), which contains sodium (Na) and Surfak which contains calcium (Ca). Generic docusate is available at low cost. These compounds are available without a prescription in any pharmacy or supermarket.

_____ Docusate NA (e.g. Colace)

_____ Docusate CA (e.g. Surfak)

_____ Take 2 tablets each day – one in the morning and one in the evening

_____ Take 4 tablets each day – two in the morning and two in the evening



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Polyethylene glycol (PEG) is another common form of stool softener. It comes as a powder which is mixed with fluid. Miralax is the common brand name; however, several generic forms are now available.

Mix 17 grams of powder (one capful or one pre-measured packet or one heaping tablespoon) in a glass of water, juice, lemonade, tea, etc., and drink.

_____ Once a day in the morning

_____ Twice a day – once in the morning and once in the evening

Bowel Movements

1. Regular bowel movements are encouraged; however, it is not necessary to have a movement every single day. Normal habits range from three movements per day to one movement every three days. Many individuals will have a daily movement in the morning, but it is not necessary to strive for this. However, it is best to avoid deferring movements. When you feel the urge, respond promptly.
2. Avoid straining and prolonged periods on the toilet. Three to five minutes are usually enough to pass a soft movement.
3. If you experience soreness, bleeding, swelling or anal irritation and itching (pruritus ani), take a warm bath after each movement (when possible) and two or three times each day for 10 minutes. Do not use oils or salts in the water. Rinse off and pat dry.
4. Do not use creams, ointments or oils around the anus unless prescribed by your doctor.

Note: Laxatives and enemas should rarely be used except when specifically advised by your doctor. Prolonged use of laxatives may actually slow the bowel.

With this simple approach, most people will develop regular bowel habits. A small percentage of individuals will have persistent problems and may require further evaluation.



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