

Keeping a Healthy Bowel

Information and advice for patients

Sandwell adult bladder and bowel service

What is a normal Bowel?

A healthy stool is soft formed and brownish in colour. It should be pain free to pass and require no or minimal straining.

The general range for bowel movements is from three times a day to three times a week.

What are the risks of not keeping a healthy bowel?

- Constipation
- Diarrhoea
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Haemorrhoids
- Diverticular Disease
- Colon Cancer
- Faecal Incontinence

How to keep a healthy bowel

1. Eat a healthy diet including foods high in fibre e.g., fruit, vegetables and whole grains
2. Aim to have 18g fibre daily
3. Drink 1.5-2litres daily
4. Aim to keep active, this will help move food through the digestive tract (gut)
5. Allow enough time on the toilet, no rushing or straining
6. Adapt the correct position for opening your bowels



Altered Bowel patterns

What is Constipation?

You are likely to be constipated if;

- You have not had your bowels open at the least three times a week
- The faeces is dry, hard or lumpy
- You are straining or in pain when opening your bowels

What is diarrhoea?

You are likely to have diarrhoea if;

- You have loose, watery stool for three or more times a day
- Diarrhoea may be:
 - **Active** which lasts 1-2 days and goes away on its own or
 - **Persistent** which lasts longer than 2 weeks and less than 4 weeks or
 - **Chronic** lasts longer than 4 weeks

What can I eat to firm my stool?

- Eat bland foods that are low in fibre e.g., bananas, rice, apple sauce and toast
- Introduce the FODMAP diet – this involves avoiding foods that are not easily broken by the gut e.g., some fruits and milk
- Try exclusion diets – eliminate foods that may be causing your symptoms usually 1 at a time and observing the effect this has over a period of 2-6 weeks
- Commence probiotics either in a drink or tablet form – this will help maintain your good bacteria in your gut

Sphincter Exercises

People with faecal incontinence can be helped by doing special exercises to strengthen the sphincter muscle:

- Locate your sphincter muscle by pretending you are preventing yourself from passing wind, the muscles around your anus should start to tighten
- Sit, stand or lie with your legs slightly apart and squeeze the muscle for 5-10 seconds, relax. Repeat 10 times
- Try to do these sets of exercises 3 times per day

Urge Resistance exercises

- Sit on the toilet for 1 minute before opening your bowels, increase this slowly to 10 minutes
- Once you can delay opening your bowels whilst sat on the toilet move to outside the bathroom
- These exercises will help you gain confidence and control of your bowel

What to be concerned about

- Altered bowel habit e.g. opening your bowels more, looser stools, or constipation
- Blood or mucus in the stool
- Unplanned weight loss
- Abdominal pain/discomfort
- Feeling your bowel does not empty completely
- Family history of bowel cancer

Further information

If you have any questions or concerns about items discussed in this leaflet, please contact your GP or continence nurse.

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

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