

## **Over-the-Counter Medications for Constipation and Diarrhea**

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### **CONSTIPATION**

Laxatives are to be used only for short-term relief of constipation. Do not use laxatives if you are not constipated, unless directed by your physician. Frequency of bowel movements can vary from person to person, from one daily to one every few days. Consult your physician if constipation lasts longer than one week.

A diet consisting of roughage (whole grain breads, cereals, bran, fruit and green leafy vegetables), six to eight full (8-ounce) glasses of liquids each day and daily exercise are important in maintaining healthy bowel function.

Do not use a laxative within two hours of taking other medicines, because it may interfere with the absorption of the medication. Many laxatives often contain large amounts of sugars, carbohydrates and sodium. If you are on a low-sugar, low-calorie or low-salt diet, check with your health care professional before using.

- Bulk-forming agents

Citrucel® (methylcellulose), Metamucil® (psyllium) and Fibercon® (polycarbophil) are bulk-forming agents that work to keep water in the intestine. This aids in softening the stool and allows for a quicker emptying of the bowel, usually within 12 to 72 hours. It is very important that you take these products with 8-ounces of water. If you have abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, rectal bleeding or sudden changes in bowel habits lasting for two weeks, do not use bulk-forming agents without consulting your physician. If chest pain, vomiting or difficulty in swallowing or breathing occur after taking these agents, seek immediate medical attention.

- Stool softeners

Colace® (docusate) and mineral oil are examples of stool softeners. Stool softeners work by softening stools for easier bowel movements. Do not take docusate and mineral oil together.

- Stimulant laxatives

Dulcolax® (bisacodyl), Perdiem® (senna) and castor oil are examples of stimulant laxatives. Stimulant laxatives act directly on the colon (large intestine) to promote muscular contraction. It works in six to eight hours after taking by mouth or within one hour of inserting a suppository into the rectum. Stimulant laxatives may be habit forming to the colon and make the person dependent on the laxative for normal bowel movements. These should be used with caution. Peri-Colace® (docusate and casanthranol) is a combination of a stool softener and a stimulant laxative. This product is not to be used regularly, unless directed by your physician.

- Hyperosmotic laxatives

Glycerin suppositories are examples of hyperosmotic laxatives that work to produce a bowel movement in 30 minutes. The side effects to glycerin suppositories are minimal.

- Saline laxatives

Magnesium citrate is an example of a saline laxative. This product works to cause a bowel movement by drawing water into the bowel, causing an increase in pressure so that the body responds by pushing the contents along. These are not to be used for repeated correction of constipation. Each dose should be taken with a full

(8-ounce) glass of water to provide enough liquid for the medicine to work properly. These medications can cause stomach cramping, nausea, vomiting and dehydration.

## **DIARRHEA**

Diarrhea may be serious. Do not use an antidiarrheal medication for more than two days unless directed by your physician. Do not use an over-the-counter product if the diarrhea is accompanied by a high fever (over 101 degrees Fahrenheit) or if blood is present in the stool.

- Antidiarrheal medicines

Imodium AD® (loperamide), Kaopectate®, Donnagel® (attapulgit) and Pepto-Bismol® (bismuth subsalicylate) are examples of medication used to relieve diarrhea. Antidiarrheal medications reduce the number of bowel movements and improve the consistency of loose or watery bowel movements.

Pepto-Bismol contains aspirin and should not be used if you are allergic to aspirin or have a viral illness (flu or chicken pox), because it may increase your risk of Reye's syndrome. Pepto-Bismol may also cause temporary darkening of the tongue and/or stool.