What causes diarrhea/constipation? What can I do about it?

**Diarrhea:** Usually, diarrhea (loose, watery stools) is not a serious health concern and clears up in 2-3 days. Many people experience diarrhea once or twice per year, but it can occur more often in some who have risk factors such as irritable bowel syndrome. Over the counter medications are available to help alleviate some of the symptoms.

Diarrhea is most often caused by a virus that infects the GI system. It is often called the “stomach flu” or “intestinal flu.” Less commonly, diarrhea can be caused by other influences such as alcohol abuse, medication use, food allergies, laxative abuse, running, or some health conditions (diabetes, Crohn’s disease, colitis, hyperthyroidism, some cancers) or treatments (radiation therapy, surgery).

Expected symptoms of diarrhea include urgency for bowel movements, thin, loose, watery stools, bloating, cramps, and/or nausea and vomiting. Less often, one may notice blood, mucus, or undigested food in the stool, weight loss, or fever. If the following occur, contact your health care provider:

- bloody or black, tarry stools
- fever (101⁰ F or higher) lasting more than 1 day
- diarrhea lasting more than 3 days
- nausea/vomiting preventing consumption of any liquids
- severe pain in your stomach or rectal area
- diarrhea after overseas travel

The biggest danger with diarrhea is usually dehydration. Your body is losing fluids, and it’s imperative to replace those fluids with oral hydration. If this is not possible due to nausea/vomiting, it may be necessary to receive IV fluids for rehydration. Signs of dehydration include: dark urine, infrequent urination, fast heart rate, headaches, dry skin, or feelings of irritability or confusion. Contact a health care provider for advice if you experience these symptoms.

http://www.webmd.com/digestive-disorders/digestive-diseases-diarrhea

**Constipation:** This is described as bowel movements that are difficult to pass or less often than normal. Prevention is the key with constipation! A few simple steps will help:

- Diet: well balanced with plenty of fiber (especially bran)
- Hydration: drink 1.5-2 quarts of water or other hydrating fluid per day
- Avoid caffeine as it can lead to dehydration (and thus constipation)
- Monitor dairy intake, as for some individuals it can lead to constipation
- Exercise regularly
- Use the bathroom when you feel the urge, don’t put off bowel movements.
In most cases, constipation is not serious and can be treated with a few simple steps. Some causes and treatments are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes for Constipation:</th>
<th>What Can I Do?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Dietary changes (lots of dairy, lack of water/fiber, changes from usual eating habits)</td>
<td>▪ Increase fluid intake by at least 2-4 glasses per day, try warm liquids (not coffee as caffeine can worsen symptoms) especially in the morning.</td>
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<td>▪ Medications (calcium or aluminum containing antacids, overuse of laxatives, narcotics, antidepressants, iron)</td>
<td>▪ Add fruits, vegetables, prunes, bran, or any fiber rich foods to your diet.</td>
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<td>▪ Health conditions (hypothyroidism, hemorrhoids, irritable bowel syndrome, neurological conditions, colon cancer)</td>
<td>▪ As a last resort, a mild over the counter stool softener can be used. However, laxatives should not be used for more than 2 weeks without consulting a provider, as they can worsen symptoms.</td>
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<td>▪ Inactivity</td>
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<td>▪ Pregnancy</td>
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<td>▪ Eating disorders</td>
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If constipation is a problem that is not responding to self-remedies, it is advisable to consult with a healthcare provider. Also, if you have abdominal pain and cramping that cannot be relieved with a bowel movement/gas, blood in your stools, weight loss without trying, pencil-thin stools, or symptoms lasting more than 2 weeks, you should consult with your provider. We are happy to discuss your symptoms at any time at the health center, so give us a call.