



Managing Bowel Incontinence: Dietary Measures

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Treatment of fecal incontinence depends on the cause and severity; it may include dietary changes, medication, bowel training, or surgery. More than one treatment may be necessary for successful control since continence is a complicated chain of events.

Dietary Changes

Food affects the consistency of stool and how quickly it passes through the digestive system. If your stools are hard to control because they are watery, you may find that eating high fiber foods adds bulk and makes stool easier to control. But people with well-formed stools may find that high fiber foods act as a laxative and contribute to the problem. Other foods that may make the problem worse are drinks containing caffeine, like coffee, tea, and chocolate, which relax the internal anal sphincter muscle.

You can adjust what and how you eat to help manage fecal incontinence.

- **Keep a food diary.** List what you eat, how much you eat, and when you have an incontinent episode. After a few days, you may begin to see a pattern involving certain foods and incontinence. After you identify foods that seem to cause problems, cut back on them and see whether incontinence improves. Foods that typically cause diarrhea, and so should probably be avoided, include
 - caffeine
 - cured or smoked meat like sausage, ham, or turkey
 - spicy foods
 - alcohol
 - dairy products like milk, cheese, and ice cream
 - fruits like apples, peaches, or pears
 - fatty and greasy foods
 - sweeteners, like sorbitol, xylitol, mannitol, and fructose, which are found in diet drinks, sugarless gum and candy, chocolate, and fruit juices
- **Eat smaller meals more frequently.** In some people, large meals cause bowel contractions that lead to diarrhea. You can still eat the same amount of food in a day, but space it out by eating several small meals.
- **Eat and drink at different times.** Liquid helps move food through the digestive system. So if you want to

slow things down, drink something half an hour before or after meals, but not with the meals.

- **Eat the right amounts of fiber.** For many people, fiber makes stool soft, formed, and easier to control. Fiber is found in fruits, vegetables, and grains. You'll need to eat 20 to 30 grams of fiber a day, but add it to your diet slowly so your body can adjust. Too much fiber all at once can cause bloating, gas, or even diarrhea. Also, too much insoluble fiber can contribute to diarrhea. [Examples of insoluble fiber include cellulose (found in legumes, seeds, root vegetables, and vegetables in the cabbage family) wheat bran, and corn bran.] So if you find that eating more fiber makes your diarrhea worse, try cutting back to two servings each of fruits and vegetables and removing skins and seeds from your food.
- **Eat foods that make stool bulkier.** Foods that contain soluble fiber slow the emptying of the bowels. Examples are bananas, rice, tapioca, bread, potatoes, applesauce, cheese, smooth peanut butter, yogurt, pasta, and oatmeal.
- **Get plenty to drink.** You need to drink eight 8-ounce glasses of liquid a day to help prevent dehydration and to keep stool soft and formed. Water is a good choice, but avoid drinks with caffeine, alcohol, milk, or carbonation if you find that they trigger diarrhea.

Over time, diarrhea can rob you of vitamins and minerals. Ask your doctor if you need a vitamin supplement.

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