



Are You Constipated? Take the Quiz



Dr. Kate Thomsen and Silky

1. Normal bowel movements are:

- a. Soft yet well formed
- b. Easily passed without straining
- c. Occur between 3 times per day to 3 times per week

2. True or false:

Normal feces contains 50% water and 50% undigested food

3. Constipation can be characterized by:

- a. Dry, hard stool that is painful to pass
- b. Bloating, gas and abdominal pain
- c. Having less than 3 bowel movements per week
- d. Straining to go and feeling not completely emptied
- e. Liquid stool that sometimes is gritty

4. Lifestyle related causes of constipation include:

- a. Dehydration
- b. Low fiber diet
- c. Lack of exercise
- d. Overuse of antibiotics

5. Consequences of chronic constipation can include:

- a. Hemorrhoids and anal fissures
- b. Fecal impaction, rectal prolapse
- c. Intestinal perforation, bowel obstruction
- d. Pelvic floor damage in women
- e. Fecal incontinence

6. Fiber refers to a diverse group of carbohydrates that humans do not have the digestive enzymes to break down. They pass through most of the digestive system unchanged. Which of these statements about fiber are true?

- a. Soluble fiber dissolves in water, forms a gel-like substance, slows intestinal transit and makes one feel full
- b. Insoluble fiber stays mostly intact and so may

speed up transit time of stool as it passes through

- c. Soluble fiber has metabolic effects including reducing blood sugar spikes and lowering cholesterol
- d. Soluble fiber includes fermentable fibers that gut bacteria can digest to produce short chain fatty acids that feed our intestinal cells

- e. Viscous Fiber forms a gel-like substance the "sits" in the gut, slowing digestion and absorption of nutrients. This results in a prolonged feeling of fullness, reduced appetite, and can be used for weight loss

- f. Resistant starches do not break down. They are fermented by bacteria in the large intestine contributing to overall gut health. They are associated with better blood sugar, lower cholesterol and less constipation
- g. Hyper-Wipers are generally fiber deficient

7. True or False:

To aid digestion, a mouthful of food should be chewed 20 times

8. What is the minimum amount of minutes it takes before the satiety signal, Leptin, will be able to communicate to your brain the message, "stop eating, we are full?"

- a. 10 minutes
- b. 20 minutes
- c. 30 minutes

9. What is the average bowel transit time (the time it takes food to pass through the entire gut)?

- a. 10 hours
- b. 24 hours
- c. 36 hours

10. What is the best way to monitor the character of your stool:

- a. Bristol Stool Scale on Wikipedia
- b. Bristol Stool Form Scale on Rome Foundation website
- c. Bristol Stool Chart on ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

ANSWERS

1. The answer is all the above. Ideally, the bowel movement should be passed within minutes of sitting on the toilet and give the sense of complete emptying. Our time pressured lives don't

allow our bowels to be consistently in a state of relaxation, and current data suggests that the average healthy 18 – 35 year old woman will take about 5 or 6 minutes to pass a stool. Sitting on the toilet for longer than 10 to 15 minutes on a regular basis, however, may be a sign to make some lifestyle changes.

It is typical to empty bowels about 30 minutes after a meal (commonly after breakfast) and there should be no need to return soon after to pass more stool. I think it is healthier to pass at least 1 bowel movement daily though—not 3 times per week. The body is designed to get rid of its waste for a reason. Stool will contain some toxins that have been processed by the liver and gall bladder to facilitate their elimination. These toxins can be reabsorbed into the blood if they are sitting in the colon for too long.

2. The answer is false.

Normal feces contains about 75% water mixed with mostly dead bacteria. It also contains small amounts of proteins, carbs, fats and undigested plant fibers.

3. The answer is all the above. Answer "e" can be true when constipation is chronic and causes impaction. Stool that is dry, hard and sitting in the colon can allow fluids to build up behind this "obstruction". As it seeps out around the hardened mass people will be complaining of diarrhea - more accurately called "overflow diarrhea". They will often start taking remedies for diarrhea which naturally makes things worse. Episodes of uncontrollable gushing of a combination of diarrhea and hardened stool can also occur.

4. The answer is all of the above. Modern day humans have a very low fiber diet compared to our physiologic prototype, Paleolithic man, living over 10,000 years ago. Their pre-agricultural diet originated almost exclusively from fruits, roots, legumes, nuts and non-cereal plant sources. As hunter gatherers, it is estimated their diet gave them about 100 grams of fiber per day. Compare that to our Institute of Medicine recommendation for a daily fiber intake for men of 38 grams per day and for women 25 grams per day. Sadder yet, the average modern diet only contains about 15 grams of fiber per day. Water is another essential nutrient we tend to skimp on. We often recommend that one should drink half an ounce of water for every pound they weigh (75 oz./day for a 150 pound per-

son). More water is needed when performing strenuous activities. Drinking coffee, tea and alcohol are dehydrating and should actually increase (a cup for a cup) one's daily fluid intake. The US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine determined that an adequate daily fluid intake is: ~15.5 cups (3.7 liters) of fluids a day for men and ~ 11.5 cups (2.7 liters) of fluids a day for women. Counting the intake of other fluid sources (juice, fruits and vegetables...) you may be able to reach your total daily fluid needs with four to six 8 oz. cups of plain water.

Immobility is a risk factor for constipation as it results in weakening of the abdominal wall muscles and difficulty raising the intra-abdominal pressure sufficiently for defecation. Studies have shown increased risk of constipation for people walking less than 0.5 km (1/3 mile) per day.

Overuse of antibiotics has many harmful impacts on the intestinal microbiota. Imbalances in the bacterial milieu combined with decreased bowel motility (less ability to push the contents through the pipe – "peristalsis") can create a bloating and gassy condition known as Small Intestinal Bowel Overgrowth (SIBO). SIBO due to a particular imbalance where archae species are producing smelly methane gas in the intestines is associated with constipation.

5. Yes, all of the above.

6. All of the above are true. Examples of insoluble fibers include lignin and cellulose. Good food sources of resistant starch include green bananas, various legumes, cashews and raw oats. These undigested fibers are generally recommended for constipation.

Soluble fibers can also be useful for constipation but they have other health benefits for cholesterol, blood sugar and weight. They include gums, psyllium, and the fermentable fibers, pectins and beta-glucans as well as inulin and oligofructose. Viscous fibers include the soluble fibers and glucomannan. Healthy whole-food sources of fermentable fibers are beans and legumes while viscous fibers are in legumes, asparagus, brussels sprouts, oats and flax seeds. My personal favorite in the Fiber Foods category is the guar gum sold as SunFiber. Caution: adding more fiber to the diet usually causes bloating and gas unless it is added slowly—very slowly. Increase the "dose" by a tiny bit

each week as the intestinal milieu adjusts.

Hyper-wiping is defined as using paper more than 3 times to clean after passing stool. Ideally it should take 1 wipe. Messy, sticky fecal matter is due to lack of bulked up water and fiber filled stool that would have been eliminated more easily and cleanly.

7. False. The recommended goal for chewing is 32 times per biteful. Hard to chew foods like steak and nuts should be chewed 40 times and softer foods like mashed potato and watermelon should be chewed 5 – 10 times per biteful.

8. Answer – 20 minutes. See #7—chew more, slow down, sit down, don't talk while eating.

9. The answer is c. Bowel transit time varies, even in the same person. The average transit time in someone who is not constipated is 30 to 40 hours. The range is 10 – 72 hours (Up to 3 days is considered still normal!!!!)

You can estimate your transit time by noting the time you eat some beets (or take some activated charcoal) and then note the first time you see that show up in your stool. If you are transiting over more than 3 days, there is new hope. In August 2022, the FDA approved Vibrant, a new pill you swallow. When it reaches your large intestine, it vibrates for 2 periods of 2 hours each to stimulate peristalsis. You poop the pill out.

10. Yes, any of these. Obviously you have to look what you put in the bowl to be able to compare and see if it is normal (a 3 or a 4). Don't be afraid to look in the bowl. But if you are nervous about it, help is on the way. The smart toilet, being designed at the Molecular Imaging Program at Stanford will take your fingerprint on the flusher and your anal-print when you sit down and the camera in your bowl will monitor your defecations and put the results on the cloud for someone to reach out to you and tell you what your poop is like. I suppose someday that will just seem normal!!

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