Constipation: An Ayurvedic Perspective
by Kester Marshall

Constipation is the passing of hard, dry bowel motions (stools) that may be infrequent or difficult to pass. It can include having to sit on the toilet for much longer than usual, the sensation afterwards that the bowel hasn't fully emptied, as well as symptoms like bloating and abdominal cramps.

In some cases constipation is a symptom of more serious illnesses or disease states that include:

- endocrine disorders such as hypothyroidism, diabetes or hypopituitarism
- obstruction due to haemorrhoids, rectal prolapse or adhesions
- tumours of the bowel or rectum
- central nervous system disease such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease or stroke

If constipation is chronic or severe, complications can develop, such as:

- Faecal impaction – the lower bowel and rectum become so packed with faeces that the muscles of the bowel can't push any of it out
- Faecal incontinence – an overfull bowel can result in involuntary 'dribbling' of diarrhoea
- Haemorrhoids or Anal Fissure – constant straining to open the bowel can damage the blood vessels of the rectum or tissues of the anal sphincter
- Rectal prolapse – constant straining can lead to a section of the rectal lining being pushed out of the anus
- Urinary incontinence – constant straining can weaken pelvic floor muscles, making the involuntary passing of urine more likely, especially when coughing, laughing or sneezing.

So it is important to not ignore constipation! Not only is it incredibly unpleasant for the sufferer, it is also the symptom of a deeper imbalance that needs to be corrected. The good news is... from an Ayurvedic perspective, it can be treated with relative ease.

### The Ayurvedic View

From an Ayurvedic point of view, constipation is predominantly a condition caused by disturbed Vata dosha (Air/Ether). Firstly, any Vata disturbance will cause increased dryness in the body which, in turn, can dry out the wastes (including faeces). This results in delayed transit through the bowel and constipation. But the other doshas can also be involved...

Excess Pitta in the form of heat can also contribute to this drying out effect, especially in combination with a Vata imbalance (hot wind is even more drying than cool wind).

The regular downward movement of Apana Vata (the wind responsible for elimination) can also be obstructed or inhibited by excess Kapha, in the form of mucus, or Ama (undigested food waste) in the bowel. In this case, rather than being dry and pebble-like, stool are more sticky and heavy.

### Treatment

Obviously if constipation is a symptom of a more serious illness, then the primary condition must be treated first, along with symptomatic treatment of the constipation.

However, if constipation is the primary issue, then an Ayurvedic approach to treatment is as follows.

Firstly, all Vata-aggravating diet and lifestyle factors should be avoided as much as possible. These include:

- suppression of the urge to pass gas or stool
- irregular meal times and sleeping routine
- eating on the run
- excessive fasting
- overly sedentary lifestyle and lack of exercise
- too much travel
- excessive change, instability or stress.

Vata-aggravating foods and drinks that should be avoided include: raw food, green smoothies, excess salads, low-fat foods, cold drinks, cereal, crackers, bread, soy milk, millet, rye, popcorn and under-cooked beans, split peas, lentils and other legumes.

If heat (Pitta) is a problem then Pitta-aggravating foods and drinks should be avoided, particularly alcohol, coffee, chilli or hot, spicy food.

Secondly, a diet that supports balanced digestion (Agni) and prevents the buildup of waste (Ama) should be followed at all times, sticking to foods that are warm, light and slightly oily in quality.

And of course, eating a diet with plenty of fibre and drinking enough water is essential. To get enough water simply fill a 1 litre thermos with hot water in the morning and sip it throughout the day, making sure it's finished by evening. You'll be getting all the water you need and at the same
time the warmth will be calming Vata and stimulating your digestive fire.

Home remedies can be very helpful, especially in mild conditions. Bulk laxatives such as slippery elm or psyllium husks are excellent. Simply take either of these (1tsp-1tbsp) in warm water or milk, daily, before bed. If there is sluggishness or heaviness it is a good idea to add a pinch of dry ginger as this will support digestion.

Castor oil can be taken in a dose of 1 tbsp before bed in ginger tea or with lemon juice. This is very useful, especially if the stool is very dry and pebble-like. But, it can have a strong laxative effect and should not be done on a daily basis in the longer-term.

The following home remedy is one of the best for constipation as it promotes digestion, helps with bloating, heaviness and gas and softens the bowel.

**Constipation home remedy**

**Ingredients:**
- 15 Raisins or Sultanas
- 2 tsp Fennel seed
- 1/2 tsp Ajwain seed
- 3 Cardamom pods
- 1/2 tsp Fresh grated ginger

**Method:**
Bring all of the ingredients to the boil in 2 cups of water, simmer until reduced to 1 cup and then drink.

Yoga poses such as pashimuttanasana (sitting forward bend) or urdwapashimuttanasana (upside down forward bend) are also helpful - but please remember that a yoga practice should be done under the guidance of a trained and experienced yoga teacher who can take your individual needs into consideration.

If the constipation is persistent or severe then stronger herbal remedies along with Medicated Basti or Herbal Enema Therapy can be administered under the guidance of a trained Ayurvedic Practitioner. These methods of treatment help to not only ‘cleanse’ the bowel of excess waste, they also help to rejuvenate the tissues of the bowel, strengthening the musculature, nourishing the mucous membranes, recolonising the bowel flora and establishing a new habit of regular and healthy bowel movements.

On that note, I should mention that colonics and colonic irrigation are not recommended by Ayurveda for treating constipation (or anything else) because they are much stronger therapies than Ayurvedic enemas. Although they may cleanse the bowel in the short-term, in the longer-term, they can leave the bowel very dry and unsupported, aggravating Vata further and causing more complications. Given the colon is considered the ‘seat’ of Vata it is critically important to treat this part of the body with the greatest of care, gently coaxing it into new habits rather than shocking it with strong therapies or laxatives.

**Conclusion**

So, don’t let constipation become a bummer (sorry, I couldn’t help myself)! Simple dietary and lifestyle changes can have life-changing, immediate effects. And please remember that in Ayurveda, every person is treated as unique and their individual requirements must be taken into account so if you are having persistent trouble, please see an Ayurvedic Practitioner for specific recommendations.

*If you are in any doubt about your health please be sure to consult an Ayurvedic Practitioner or your local health physician.*