

## 4 Signs That Your Constipation Warrants a Trip to the ER



### **RELATED:** Do You Have Irritable Bowel Syndrome—Or Just a Sensitive Stomach?

The study authors couldn't say why so many people go to the hospital for constipation, although they note that experiencing abdominal pain may be a reason and that people on government-funded insurance are more likely to go to the ER than to pick up at-home treatments.

For the most part, you *should* be able to take care of constipation at home. And while many people get spooked if they can't go to the bathroom for a few days, it's not a

medical emergency, says Robynne Chutkan, M.D., a gastroenterologist in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and author of *Gutbliss: A 10-Day Plan to Ban Bloat, Flush Toxins, and Dump Your Digestive Baggage*. However, if it's been a week since your last bowel movement—and you've tried at-home treatments to no avail—that's a good time to call your doc to schedule an in-office visit, says Chutkan, instead of clogging up the ER waiting room (sorry, we had to!).

That being said, if you're experiencing severe pain along with your constipation, there's a chance it could actually be a symptom of a larger issue—and in that case, a trip to the ER could save your life. Here's what you need to know:



### When You Should Visit the ER

If in addition to constipation, you experience a combination of any of these four symptoms—**severe abdominal pain**, **an inability to pass gas**, **vomiting**, and **stomach bloating**—you might actually have a bowel obstruction. This is a serious issue that definitely warrants a trip to the ER, says Chutkan. Keep in mind that the pain from a bowel obstruction is intense—much more so than any pain felt from constipation, says Chutkan.

### **RELATED:** 8 Reasons Why You Can't Poop — And How to Fix That

A bowel obstruction occurs when either your small or large intestine becomes blocked.

“A full obstruction is what needs urgent treatment,” says Chutkan, while a partial blockage, which can be caused by chronic gastrointestinal conditions like Chron’s disease, doesn’t require medical attention (that can be treated by eating smaller, more frequent meals, says Chutkan). One of the causes of a full obstruction is prolonged constipation, which leads to hard, dry stool getting stuck in your rectum.

The pain from a blockage comes from the bowels stretching, says Chutkan, and left alone, this can lead to a bowel perforation. (That’s when a hole forms through the [stomach](#), large bowel, or small intestine. Can you say *ouch*?) When it comes to treatment, Chutkan says a doctor would put a tube down the nose to suck everything out and decompress the bowel.



### **How to Treat Your Constipation at Home**

The fix for regular ol’ constipation is actually pretty simple. “People want sexier remedies than water, fiber, and exercise, but 90 percent of the time, that’s what they need [to ease constipation],” says Chutkan. ““If you’re not moving, neither are your bowels.” Increase your unprocessed fiber intake from natural sources, like fruits, vegetables, and legumes, and make sure you’re upping your H2O intake to move everything smoothly through your system.

### **RELATED: 7 Foods That Are Crucial for a Healthy Gut**

If that doesn't work, try a fiber supplement or one to two tablespoons of pure psyllium husk (you can find this in a product like Metamucil) with plenty of water, says Chutkan. Laxatives like Miralax are her final line of defense.

"The important thing is that stool is waste matter," says Chutkan. "It's toxic, and it's not supposed to be hanging around in your colon for several days at a time." So even if your symptoms aren't bad enough right now for you to head to the hospital, that doesn't mean you shouldn't solve try to solve the problem.