

ALTERNATIVES



Scientifically proven alternatives to conventional medicine

Constipation

You are constipated if you defaecate twice a week or less, and the motion is associated with straining. In orthodox medicine, constipated patients are routinely advised to drink plenty of fluids, take regular exercise and include bran in their diet. However, the bran that is generally sold is made from the husks of wheat, rye, barley and oats, and often leads to an increase in abdominal bloating, discomfort and colic.

◆ **Naturopathic medicine** has a better bulking and lubricating agent in linseed (*Linum usitatissimum*, or flax seed in the US). These seeds can be taken as they are or crushed, but not soaked beforehand. Alternatively, psyllium husks (*Ispaghula* or *Plantago ovata psyllium*, or flea seed), are another bulk-forming agent (Gut, 1987; 28: 1510-3; Rev Esp Enf Digest, 1992; 82: 17-22). A naturopath will also attempt to correct any imbalances in the bacterial flora of the gut. In an open trial, 27 patients with chronic constipation were treated with a regimen to eliminate unwanted flora, then given a balanced mix of 'friendly' anaerobes and aerobes by intestinal infusion. During the follow-up six months later, none of the patients required further laxatives (Gastroenterology, 1994; 106: A459). A controlled clinical trial established significant beneficial effects of drinking mineral water containing sulphate (2754 mg/L) on bowel movements and stool consistency. Thirty-four volunteers received either 500 mL of mineral water or tap water (29 mg/L of sulphate). Bowel movements and stool consistency improved dramatically with the mineral water, but not at all with tap water.

◆ **Biofeedback** has shown some long-term beneficial effects for adult patients in the treatment of constipation (Gut, 1998; 42: 517-21).

◆ **Massage therapy** may be a promising treatment option for constipation, according to a review of four trials involving 101 patients who each received abdominal massage (Forsch Komplementarmed, 1999; 6: 149-51).

◆ **Phytotherapy** using a combination of aloe vera, psyllium andcelandine will regulate the bowel movements of the constipated. Thirty-five patients received either up to three capsules of the herbal combination (1.5 g), or a placebo, every day for 28 days. There was a significant improvement in bowel movements in the treated group compared with placebo (Digestion, 1991; 49: 65-71).

◆ **Nutritional medicine** tests constipated patients for deficiencies in either folic or pantothenic acid, as both are associated with constipation (Can Med Assoc J, 1976; 15: 217). Dextranthenol, the alcohol of pantothenic acid, proved beneficial in the treatment of constipation in two double-blind studies and a number of open trials (Acta Vitaminol Enzymol, 1982; 4: 87-97).

◆ **Testing for food sensitivities** can help since certain allergenic foods may induce constipation. In my own experience, the staple grains (wheat, rye, barley, maize or even rice) are often responsible. Cane sugar or cow's milk can also cause food sensitivity-related constipation. In one double-blind study, cow's milk was compared with soy milk in 65 children with chronic constipation treated with laxatives without success. Sixty-eight per cent improved with the soy milk whereas none improved with cow's milk (N Engl J Med, 1998; 339: 1100-4).

Warning: A number of stimulant laxatives, such as senna (*Cassia senna*), cascara sagrada (chittam bark or *Rhamnus purshiana*), Chinese rhubarb (*Rheum palmatum*) and alder buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula*) contain anthraquinone, which is extremely effective in promoting bowel movements, producing a semi-fluid stool usually in less than 10 hours. However, these anthraquinone-containing laxatives can produce severe cramping, and electrolyte and fluid deficiencies as well as malabsorption of nutrients. As anthraquinones are released into breast milk, they can cause diarrhoea in breastfed babies.

Longer-term use of these laxatives can lead to a poorly functioning colon, dependence on the laxative for relief and pigmentation of the colonic mucosa (melanosis coli). Laxatives can also result in mineral deficiencies, including hypokalaemia (an abnormally low blood potassium level), that may be associated with muscular weakness and, in extreme cases, even paralysis.

Harald Gaier

Harald Gaier is a registered homoeopath, naturopath and osteopath.