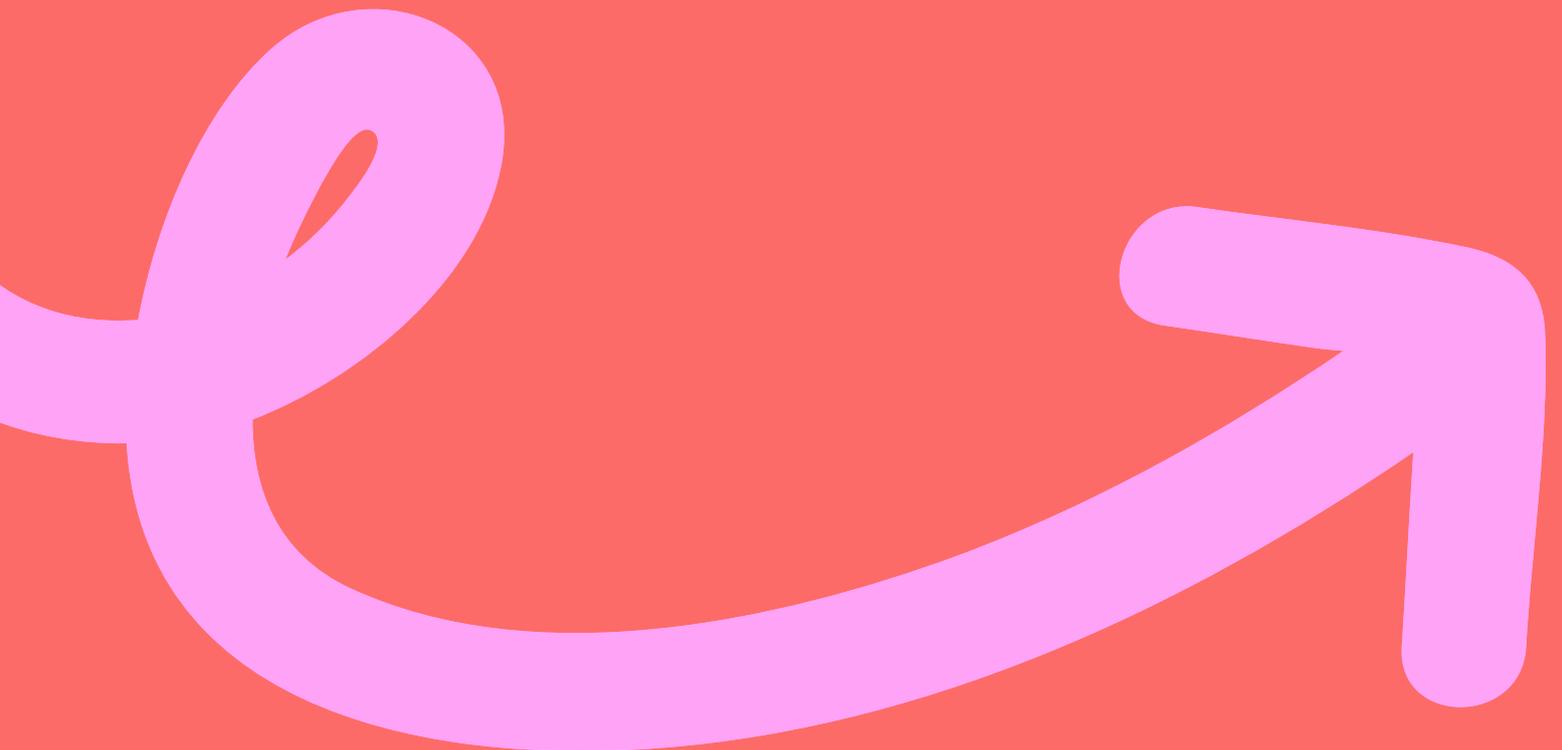




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HEALTH



How to promote a healthy bowel your whole woman guide



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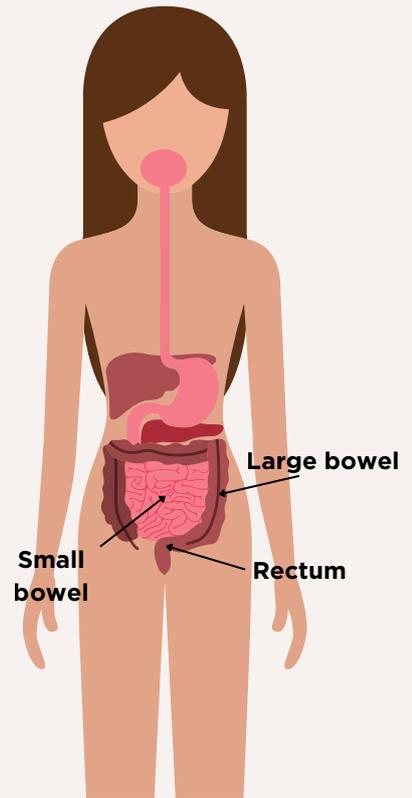
PROMOTING A HEALTHY BOWEL

HOW THE BOWEL WORKS

Your bowel is the lower part of the digestive tract and starts from the stomach, through your small intestine, around your large intestine, down to your rectum and out of your anus.

The bowel is made of smooth muscle which is controlled involuntarily via the autonomic nervous system. The muscles use peristalsis (wave-like motion) to process and transport food along the bowel.

Imagine a sausage-making machine, we need to ensure we fill our bowel with the right nutrients and fluids, feed it at the right time, keep the parts healthy and well maintained, and prevent blockages, so we can have a nice formed stool at the end which is easy to pass.



WHAT IS NORMAL?

How often you have a bowel motion can vary from person to person.

This can range from 3 x per day to 3 x per week and aims for a stool consistency of Type 3-4 (see Bristol Stool Chart).

Please take into consideration that some people's 'normal' may be outside of these recommendations due to treatment or disease, but they should be investigated and managed appropriately.

TIPS FOR A HEALTHY BOWEL

EAT MORE VARIETY OF FOODS

The recommendations are to eat around 30 different plants per week. Having a variety of foods with different colours (Eat the Rainbow) means you are more likely to get a diet rich in fibre, polyphenols and antioxidants- which our gut bacteria love! People who follow a Mediterranean diet have a more diverse range of good gut bacteria.

EAT MORE FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

Our gut bacteria love fibre because it is their main source of fuel. Eating a diet rich in fibre, ideally, around 30g per day including soluble and insoluble sources means we can have good-quality bowel motions. Fruits, vegetables and legumes with deep colours are rich in polyphenols and antioxidants which have a range of health benefits including a reduction in inflammation, stable blood sugars, lower risk of heart disease, better skin, reduced cancer risk and better cognitive health.



SOLUBLE AND INSOLUBLE FIBRE

Fibre plays a crucial role in maintaining a healthy bowel and is categorised into two types: soluble and insoluble. Balancing both types is important for optimal digestive health.

Soluble Fibre

Soluble fibre dissolves in water to form a gel-like substance. It is more easily digested than insoluble fibre and helps regulate bowel movements by softening stool and speeding up digestion. Key sources include:

- Oats
- Lentils
- Fruits and vegetables (e.g., apples, oranges, and carrots)
- Chia seeds
- Flax/linseeds

While beneficial, too much soluble fibre can lead to loose stools. Cooking some sources of soluble fibre may reduce their effectiveness.

Insoluble Fibre

Insoluble fibre does not dissolve in water. It adds bulk to the stool and is less digestible, slowing the digestive process and promoting regularity. Common sources are:

- Bran
- Whole wheat products
- Skins of fruits and vegetables
- Nuts and seeds

Increasing insoluble fibre can help manage loose stools, but excessive intake may cause bloating or discomfort in sensitive individuals.

Balancing Fibre in the Diet

The Department of Health recommends a daily intake of 30g of fibre, derived from both soluble and insoluble sources. This can be achieved by including:

- Five servings of fruits and vegetables
- Two wheat biscuits (e.g., Weetabix)
- Two thick slices of wholemeal bread
- Skins of jacket potatoes or other fibrous foods

Dietary Adjustments for Bowel Health

If stools are loose, reduce soluble fibre and increase insoluble fibre gradually.

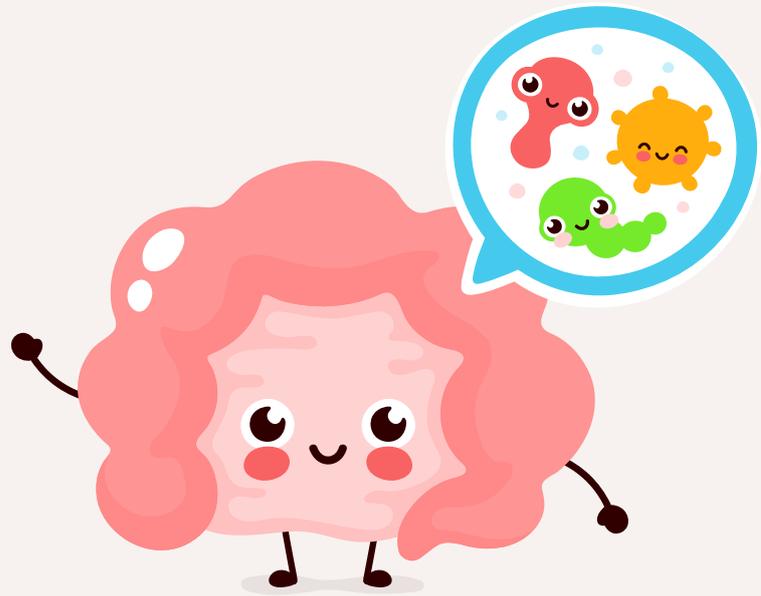
Identify and eliminate dietary triggers like spicy foods, caffeine, alcohol, and artificial sweeteners, which can exacerbate symptoms.

Adequate hydration and gradual adjustments are key when increasing fibre intake to support digestion and avoid discomfort. For personalised advice, consult a healthcare professional.

PRE-BIOTIC FOODS

Pre-biotics often come in fruits and vegetables, nuts, grains and legumes. They are the fibre that our 'good' bacteria like to eat. Foods rich in pre-biotics include:

- bananas
- blueberries
- nectarines
- oats
- couscous
- bran, barley and rye
- cashews
- chicory
- artichokes
- garlic, onions
- leeks



PRO-BIOTIC FOODS

Pro-biotics foods contain live bacteria and organisms which help to increase our diversity. You can use supplements but a food-first approach will yield the best results. There is conflicting data on whether probiotics are beneficial during and after antibiotic use, but this area of research is rapidly growing, so watch this space! Sources of probiotics are often found in fermented or pickled foods:

- natural yoghurt
- kefir
- kombucha
- sauerkraut
- pickles
- miso
- tempeh
- kimchi
- cheeses that have been aged but not pasteurized

DRINK COFFEE

Research has shown that people who drink coffee have a more diverse microbiome (community of gut bacteria). However, a dose of at least 4 cups a day may not be manageable for many people due to the diuretic nature of coffee and its stimulating properties. While this is great for people with a slow, more constipated tendency, it's not a great strategy for people who already struggle with urgency or gut problems.

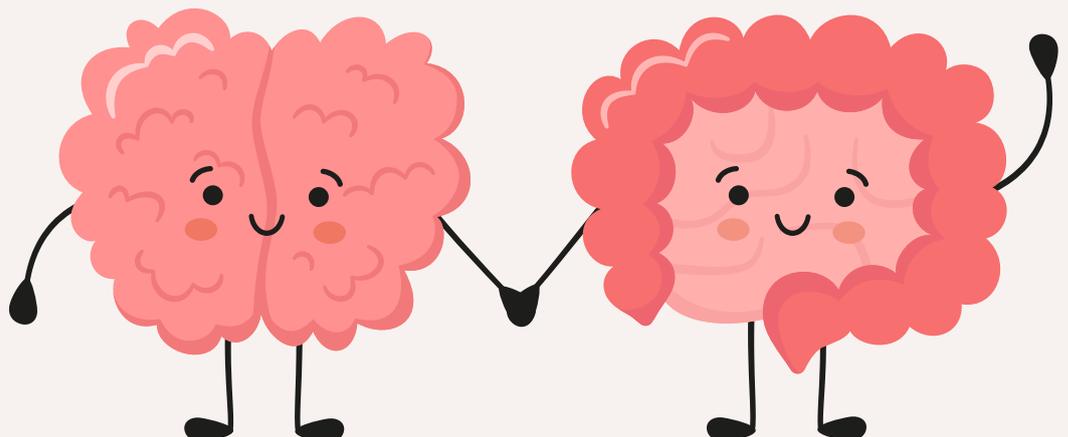
AVOID ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

There are different levels of processed foods such as milk-which is minimally processed, to a biscuit which is highly processed. Basically the more the product looks like the original ingredient the less processed it is. It's also good to take a look at the ingredients list and see if you can recognise the ingredients. Ideally you more you can recognise the better. This is because many ultra-processed foods are full of refined sugars, sweeteners, salt, unhealthy fats, additives and preservatives, which have been shown to have a negative impact on our gut bacteria.

STRESS

Stress can have a negative impact on your gut not just in terms of our gut bacteria but also the frequency and consistency of your stools. People with anxiety and depression are more likely to have Irritable bowel syndrome or urgency, possibly due to the relationship between the gut and the brain. You can reduce stress by:

- relaxation techniques such as breathing
- connecting with others
- therapy
- sleep
- exercise
- journalling
- hobbies



LONG TERM MEDICATION

Certain medications, when used over an extended period, can significantly impact bowel function. For instance:

- **Antibiotics** can disrupt gut flora, leading to diarrhoea or constipation. Probiotics and a fibre-rich diet can help restore balance.
- **Opioids and painkillers** often slow bowel motility, causing constipation.
- **Laxatives**, when used excessively, can lead to dependency and reduced bowel efficiency.
- **Antacids**, particularly those containing aluminium or calcium, can cause constipation, while magnesium-based antacids may result in diarrhoea.

FEMALE HORMONES

Hormonal fluctuations can greatly influence bowel health:

- **Menstrual Cycle:** Higher progesterone levels during the luteal phase can slow digestion, causing constipation, while premenstrual changes and period pain can release Prostaglandins leading to looser stools.
- **Pregnancy:** Increased progesterone often causes constipation, and iron supplements can exacerbate the issue.
- **Perimenopause and Menopause:** Reduced oestrogen can affect gut motility and microbiome diversity, causing bloating or irregular bowel movements.

CONTRACEPTION

Hormonal contraceptives, such as oral contraceptive pills, implants, or IUDs, may influence bowel health:

- **Oral Contraceptives:** Some women experience changes in stool consistency or frequency.
- **Progestin-Only Methods:** These may slow gut transit, leading to constipation.
- **Copper IUDs:** These are less likely to impact bowel function directly but may cause abdominal cramping.

While contraception may have unwanted side effects, it's important to weigh the risks and benefits of taking contraception and discuss your options with your GP or nurse. Everyone is different, and these side effects can often be managed without having to stop contraception. In some cases, a different form of contraception may be better suited to your needs. Open communication with your healthcare provider is essential to finding the right balance for your overall health and lifestyle.

LIFESTYLE

Lifestyle factors such as sleep, exercise, alcohol intake and smoking are incredibly important to consider.

- Getting enough sleep means our body can get rid of toxins and waste material from our bodies.
- Exercise can help with gut motility, improving our mood as well as increasing diversity in our gut. High intensity exercise has been linked to higher incidences of loose/urgent bowel movements.
- Smoking and alcohol intake can increase our risk of intestinal disorders and cancers. Excessive alcohol intake can lead to dehydration and constipation. For others it can cause loose bowels and urgency.

TOILETING MECHANICS

When we have difficulty relaxing our pelvic floor on the toilet, our breath can be a powerful tool to help. Specifically, it can assist in relaxing the puborectalis, a sling-like muscle that creates a natural bend in our rectum. Using a stool or toilet step to elevate your knees slightly higher than your hips can position your body in the optimal posture—think of a squatted position with a relaxed belly. This allows the puborectalis muscle to lengthen and makes bowel movements easier.

I like to use the ABC acronym as a simple reminder for improving toileting habits:

A - Awareness

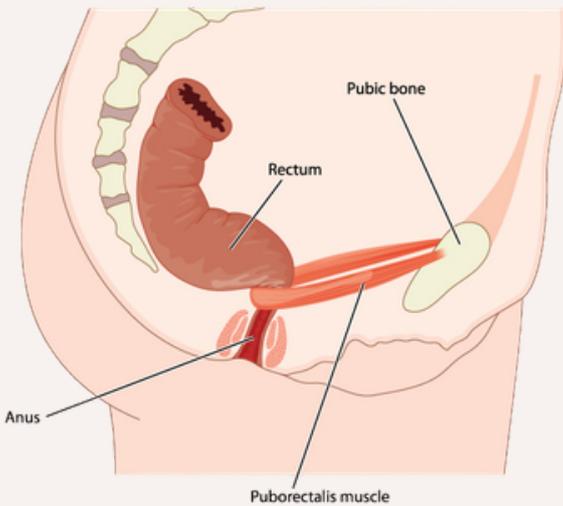
- Take note of any tension in your body. Are you sitting properly or hovering? Hovering can prevent your pelvic floor muscles from relaxing.
- Ask yourself: Are you rushing? Distracted?
- Bring your awareness to your pelvic floor. Visualize it like a bowl with a hole at the bottom, and imagine that hole gradually getting larger.

B - Breath

- Keep your belly relaxed. Breathe in gently and direct your breath toward your pelvic floor.
- Avoid forcing your breath downward or closing off your airway.

C - Co-contraction

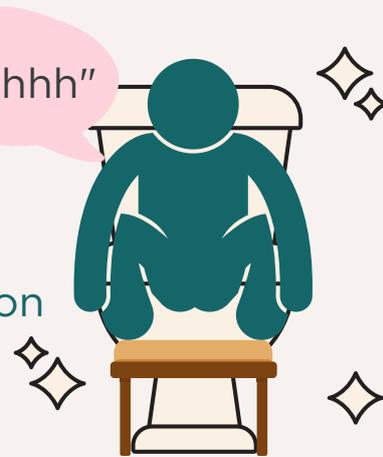
- If you need a little help emptying your bladder or bowels, exhale through your mouth as if you're blowing through a straw or making a "shhh" sound.
- This activates your deep core muscles gently and helps without straining or holding your breath.



By practicing these steps, you can improve your toileting mechanics and reduce unnecessary strain on your pelvic floor.

"Shhhh"

Awareness
Breath
Co-contraction



RED FLAGS

When to Seek Help: Red Flag Symptoms

While occasional changes in bowel habits are normal, certain symptoms may indicate more serious underlying conditions. Seek medical advice promptly if you experience any of the following:

- **Blood in Stool:** Fresh red blood or dark, tarry stools may indicate bleeding in the gastrointestinal tract.
- **Unexplained Weight Loss:** Losing weight without trying could signal an underlying health issue.
- **Severe or Persistent Abdominal Pain:** Especially if accompanied by fever, vomiting, or bloating.
- **Changes in Bowel Habits:** Significant or unexplained changes in stool frequency, consistency, or appearance lasting more than a few weeks.
- **Mucus in Stool:** Visible mucus may suggest inflammation or infection.
- **Iron Deficiency Symptoms:** Fatigue, weakness, or pallor, which may be related to gastrointestinal blood loss.
- **Family History of Bowel Diseases:** If there's a history of bowel cancer, Lynch Syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, or coeliac disease, early evaluation of unusual symptoms is essential.

Next Steps

If you notice any of these symptoms, contact your GP or healthcare provider. Early intervention can help diagnose and manage potential conditions effectively.