

# Addressing gut issues

CONSTIPATION is a health condition when one's bowel movement occurs less than two or three times per week.

Constipation affects all age groups, especially the elderly, who often suffer from chronic stomach discomfort and lazy bowels that could potentially worsen if left untreated.

"The biggest group of people who experience constipation are older people, and Malaysia has an ageing population of about three million who are above 60 years old," says Datuk Dr Rajbans Singh, consultant physician, geriatrician and healthy ageing specialist.

Having insufficient fibre in one's diet, not drinking enough water, immobility and physical inactivity can contribute to constipation.

"Taking multiple medications can also affect bowel movements. For example, antibiotics can destroy good gut bacteria and contribute to inflammation of the bowel.

"Many individuals think that constipation is just part of ageing, but they do not realise the issues and discomfort constipation could bring to their lives," adds Dr Rajbans.

According to him, many elderly people who are prone to constipation resort to laxatives to solve the problem, but taking too much laxatives can result in lazy bowel syndrome.

"Laxatives do not usually require a doctor's prescription. This is how most people start abusing the medicine and later develop an addiction," he says.

"Chronic use of laxatives could cause excessive bowel contractions that make the intestinal muscles become tired and sluggish.



**Chronic use of laxatives could cause excessive bowel contractions that make the intestinal muscles become tired and sluggish.**

Datuk Dr Rajbans Singh

Eventually, the bowel stops reacting to the medication and ends up requiring higher doses to have the muscles moving again."

However, constipation is a lifestyle disorder that is highly preventable through lifestyle changes.

Dr Rajbans advises, "Simple things such as exercising and eating the right diet with plenty of water and dietary fibre can make a big difference.

"Brisk walking after a meal is one way of making the gut move. Looking after our gut bacteria is also essential to overall health.

"We have more bacteria in our body than our cells. Too much refined food and antibiotics can destroy good bacteria, leading to constipation and poor immune system."

According to Dr Rajbans, if one

is taking the recommended four to five portions of fruits and vegetables a day, meeting the daily fibre intake will not be an issue.

"However, most elderly are unable to consume such a large amount of fibre due to indigestion and difficulty chewing. Taking a powdered fibre supplement that provides both soluble and insoluble fibres could help solve the problem."

Soluble fibre is digested in the gut while the insoluble type helps move roughage through the bowels.

"The two are equally

important. Fibre acts as a culture for good bacteria (probiotics) to thrive and grow. We need to have both types of fibre to stimulate bowel movement.

"People who cannot take foods that are high in fibre should look for supplements that contain good fibre content and the type of bacteria that has been clinically studied.

"Taking a fibre plus probiotics supplement regularly is a good

way to prevent constipation," he says.

Optimising gut health is possible by choosing the right supplement and changing our lifestyles for the better.

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## "All Disease begins in the Gut"

- Hippocrates, The Father of Modern Medicine

In Malaysia, colorectal cancer is the second most common cancer in men and the third most common cancer in women.<sup>1</sup>

Diets low in fiber, unbalanced gut bacteria, physical inactivity and chronic laxative use are common causes of poor gut health.<sup>2</sup>



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Source:

<sup>1</sup> 3rd report of the National Cancer Registry, Ministry of Health, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup> American Journal of Gastroenterology, 99:750-759, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> British Journal of Nutrition (2015), 114, 1638-1646.

\* MOH, Food (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2017.

\*\* *B. lactis* (BB-12R) is an MOH-approved probiotic strain for food products.

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