

Executive summary

Our bowels have a significant impact on our health and wellbeing.

Poor bowel health and chronic constipation is debilitating for millions of people and the condition is currently preventing thousands of people in the UK from enjoying the best life possible. This includes taking part in many aspects of everyday life – such as going to work or enjoying time with our friends and families, all key aspects of wellbeing.

Despite the critical role that bowels play in our health, many people are needlessly suffering with chronic constipation because of the taboo nature of the subject, combined with a lack of understanding of the issue.

Research by Coloplast¹, a world leader in ostomy care, urology and continence care, shows that being unable to manage constipation effectively is leading to thousands of hospital admissions each year, often through A&E. Findings of the research include:

66,287 people in the UK were admitted to hospital with constipation as the main condition in 2014/15, equivalent to **182 people a day**.

Of those, **48,409** were unplanned emergency admissions (this is equivalent to 133 per day).

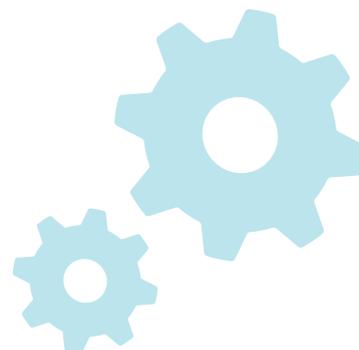


“ The medical definition of constipation includes the following:

- **Infrequent bowel movements – i.e. opening the bowels less than three times a week**
- **Needing to strain to open your bowels on more than a quarter of occasions**
- **Passing a hard or pellet-like stool on more than a quarter of occasions** ”

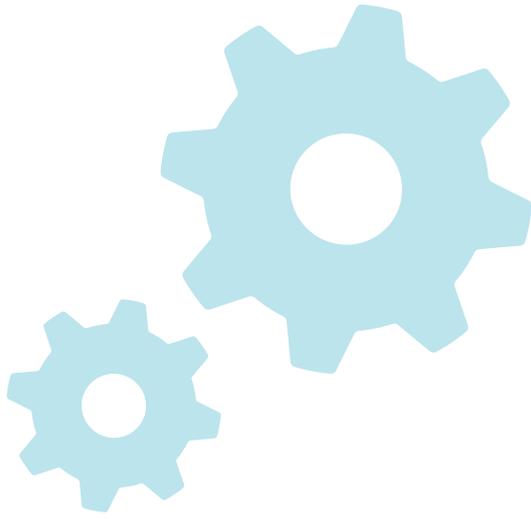
The total cost to hospitals for treating unplanned admissions due to constipation was **£145 million** in 2014/15. The figure is likely to be much higher for total NHS expenditure on constipation when including GP visits, home visits and prescriptions.

The prescription cost of laxative costs is **£101 million** (Over the counter costs of laxatives will undoubtedly be higher).²



¹<http://www.coloplast.co.uk/>

² Health and Social Care Information Centre, Prescribing by GP Practice 2015



There are a number of factors contributing to the high number of hospital visits for constipation. Coloplast commissioned a YouGov survey of 2,352 people which asked people about their knowledge of the issue and how they would deal with it and here are the results:

Nearly **1 in 5** people feel embarrassed talking to their GP about constipation.

If they thought they were suffering from constipation, over a fifth of people would try and solve it themselves, without speaking to anyone about it.

Talking to a GP about bowel health was found to be equally as embarrassing as talking to them about erectile dysfunction **19%** of GB adults would be embarrassed to talk about either of these issues.



In addition to the embarrassment of constipation, the survey also shows there is a lack of understanding of what constipation is, what is 'normal' when it comes to bowel health, and not knowing how to treat it.

Constipation is a manageable and treatable condition. Being comfortable discussing constipation with your health care provider sooner, rather than later, is essential to prevent more intensive interventions. It will also save money for the NHS in treatment costs and expensive preventable non-elective admissions.



About Coloplast

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www.coloplast.co.uk

³ <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Constipation/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Introduction

Good health is something we value above almost anything. Whether suffering from a cold, or managing a long term illness, ill health can prevent participation in everyday activities like socialising, taking part in hobbies, going to work, maintaining relationships, and caring for ourselves and loved ones. Often we want the right advice and treatment from our GP so we can get back to our day-to-day activities quickly.

Yet there is one preventable and manageable illness affecting 2 million people in the UK that we're too embarrassed to seek help for. Our research shows that chronic constipation is causing people to suffer in silence and pain, leading to 66,287 hospital admissions in 2014/15 ⁵ at a cost of £145 million to the NHS.⁶

Myth:
There is no treatment for constipation apart from surgery

Our bowel habits are an important indicator of our health and need the same attention and care as we would give our heart, joints and eyesight. Understanding good bowel health can help us manage many preventable conditions and minimise complications that can be associated with long-term conditions. A conservative estimate is that there are around 6.5 million people in the UK today with some form of bowel problem; that's 1 in 10 of us.

2 million
people are
thought to
have chronic
constipation in
the UK⁴

But due to the personal nature of the topic and our shyness in discussing it, there is low awareness of how common chronic constipation is and the effective treatments for it. The issue is rarely discussed in the media, leaving patients to believe it's a less common, and less serious, health issue than it actually is.

With 48,409 emergency admissions for constipation last year alone, this is clearly a national problem that we are not talking about. We should be.

Not talking about our bowels is costing us

Coloplast commissioned research with YouGov which revealed that a significant proportion of the population does not think constipation is a serious health issue. Many admit they would wait for several weeks before addressing the issue, with confusion and myths about what are normal and healthy bowels.

.....
11% could not identify or did not know the symptoms of constipation.
.....

.....
Nearly **1 in 5** people thought that passing stools less than once a day is a symptom of constipation.
.....

.....
A third of people said they would search online for how to treat constipation, if they thought they might be suffering from it.
.....

.....
35% of people said they would wait to see if their symptoms cleared up, before speaking to their GP.
.....

.....
Nearly **1 in 10** people who would seek advice from a healthcare profession would wait between 2 weeks and a month (after first noticing constipation symptoms) before speaking with them.
.....

⁴ <http://my-bowel.co.uk/>

⁵ HSCIC, Hospital Episode Statistics, 2014-2015, Primary Diagnosis 4 Character <http://www.conservationsleadershipprogramme.org/our-projects/supported-projects/>

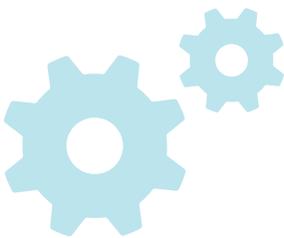
⁶ Calculated using above admissions data and hospital treatment costs from Department of Health, 2014, Reference costs 2013-14, p. 5, 'Finished Consultant Episodes': https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380322/01_Final_2013-14_Reference_Costs_publication_v2.pdf

Financial cost

The unwillingness to address the issue of constipation is preventing thousands of people from seeking effective early treatment, therefore requiring hospital treatment later down the line.

Research commissioned by Coloplast shows that constipation has cost hospitals £145 million to treat, using 162,748 hospital bed days in the last year alone. This is a significant strain on NHS resources for a preventable, treatable and easily manageable condition.

In addition to the financial cost there is the argument of its wider impact upon the UK economy. Ill health and anxiety from constipation will also contribute to days off work and is detrimental to UK productivity.



Myth:
Constipation
just means
I need more
fibre

Who is affected?

Constipation is far from an unusual problem, with an estimated 1 in 7 adults, and 1 in 3 children affected at any one time. Studies have shown that women are twice as likely to suffer from it.⁷ Constipation is also common during pregnancy and older adults are five times as more likely to have constipation than younger ones. This is a common health issue we need to address.

Sufferers can be divided into two medical groups: Functional and Neurogenic.

The majority of the population would fall into the 'Functional' category.

Functional

Functional constipation is diagnosed when a person is experiencing constipation symptoms, but there are no underlying non-bowel problems. All of the organs in your body are working, but there are still signs that something is wrong.

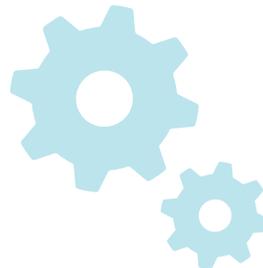
Many people who suffer from functional constipation are embarrassed to visit their GP, or worried that there might be a more serious, life-threatening condition underlying it. This is very rarely the case. However, it's always best to speak to your GP or healthcare provider who may want to make sure that there isn't another problem causing your symptoms.

Wellbeing cost – mental and physical

Constipation is seen by many as a minor health issue, meaning the serious long-term impact on health and wellbeing can be overlooked and not properly addressed.

For those who suffer from constipation, their quality of life can diminish enormously. Chronic constipation can cause debilitating psychological and physical distress. It can cause chronic pain and UTIs are common in women who suffer from constipation. If it's not dealt with early on, it could lead to complex problems later on such as haemorrhoids, anal fissures or rectal prolapse. For those with an existing health condition, constipation is a secondary health impact, cruelly adding to their health complications.

Constipation makes it hard for one to travel freely, making it necessary to identify every accessible toilet and making social situations difficult to attend. Individuals suffering from constipation may lose a lot of their personal time, perhaps through time spent on the toilet trying to open their bowel or time spent worrying about it. These factors can all have a knock-on effect on mental wellbeing, damaging confidence and self-esteem.



182 people
a day are admitted
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constipation

Neurogenic

Neurogenic constipation is common in people who already have an underlying condition, such as spina bifida, multiple sclerosis (MS), Parkinson's, spinal cord injury and those who have suffered a stroke.

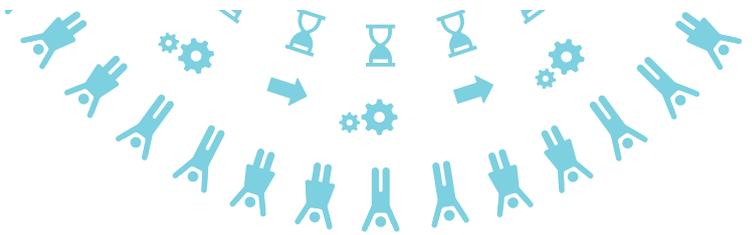
Neurogenic bowel is a condition that affects the body's process for storing and eliminating solid wastes from food. Because nerve endings in the rectum help to alert people of the need to pass a stool when it enters the rectum, a lack of nervous control prevents the bowel from functioning properly. In people with spina bifida, MS or spinal cord injury, this message from the nerve to the brain may become lost or incomplete. Control of the external anal sphincter may also be disrupted, increasing the risk of incontinence. Approximately 68% of people with MS will develop bowel problems such as chronic constipation and faecal incontinence.⁸

Other non-neurogenic diseases

Chronic constipation is a side effect of other diseases such as endometriosis and diabetes and underactive thyroid.

⁷ Epidemiology and management of chronic constipation in elderly patients. Vazquez Roque M, Bouras EP. Clin Interv Aging. 2015 Jun 2;10:919-30

⁸ Hinds JP, Eidelman BH, Wald A. Prevalence of bowel dysfunction in multiple sclerosis. A population survey. Gastroenterology 1990;98:1538-1542.



What's the solution?

Bowel health is one of the most important bodily functions. People need to have a better understanding of what constitutes a healthy bowel, and be comfortable and confident talking about any issues they may have.

When pushed on the reason behind unwillingness to talk about bowel health or suffering from constipation, the research reveals the lack of knowledge around this crucial component of our overall health and wellbeing, leading to a knock-on effect on people accessing the right treatment.

Nearly **1 in 5** people would feel embarrassed talking to their GP about constipation.

Talking to a GP about bowel health was found to be equally as embarrassing as talking to them about erectile dysfunction (19% of GB adults would be embarrassed to talk about either of these issues).



Nearly 1 in 5 people would feel embarrassed talking to their GP about constipation



162,748 days in hospital beds were spent by patients with constipation

39% feel it is not worth seeking medical health for constipation, because it's a minor health issue.

1/2 of those questioned feel it was not worth seeking medical help for constipation and that they could treat the condition at home without help.

24% of people said they would only speak to a healthcare professional about constipation after trying to treat it themselves

Next steps

For further information on constipation, please visit:
www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Constipation/
www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

We need to talk about it

These attitudes and lack of understanding are having a serious result on our health service and wellbeing.

Opening up conversations about constipation will help more people to understand the severity of long-term constipation that can be overlooked. Being able to talk more comfortably about constipation would raise awareness of the correct advice and treatments, addressing bowel health early on. This will save the NHS money and keep the population more active, healthy and happy.

To support this, individuals suffering from constipation should first try some lifestyle changes - regular meal times, improved high-fibre diet, staying hydrated and taking regular exercise. If these don't work, probiotics and OTC laxatives have been known to help people with chronic constipation.



Myth:
Constipation
is an inevitable
part of ageing

However, advice about improved diet, exercise and laxatives doesn't necessarily work for everyone, and may not be suitable for people with long-term conditions or immobility. Instead, some people with chronic constipation may need a non-pharmacological treatment such as trans-anal irrigation which regulates bowel movements.

Addressing the topic and lack of awareness of bowel health will help those suffering from constipation access the right treatment early on.

Empowering the population to be able to take control of their bowel health will prevent escalating costs for the NHS and the detrimental impact on individual wellbeing and long term health.

Notes to editors

About the financial calculations:

- 66,2078 total admissions in 2014/15 which consists of:
 - 48,409 unplanned emergency admissions
 - 17,798 elective inpatients
 - 162,748 bed days due to constipation.

To work out the cost of constipation:

48,409 unplanned emergency admissions x £1,542 per visit
=74,646,678

+

17,798 elective inpatients x £3,375 per stay = 60,068,250

+

15,319 day cases x £698 per day = 10,692,662

Estimated total cost of constipation = £145,407,590
in hospital costs in 2014/15

Medical verification

This report has been verified and is endorsed by some members of the Bowel Interest Group (BIG); a group of medical experts who take a special interest in bowel health. BIG is a national group, focused on bowel health across healthcare and community services. The group supports Health Care Professionals with an interest in the subject and works with patients and professionals to raise awareness of bowel health and effective bowel management.

Dr Anton Emmanuel. Senior Lecturer in Neuro-Gastroenterology, University College London Hospital

Dr Julian Spinks BSc. MBBS. DGM. Senior Partner at GP surgery in Kent.

Public and patient voice: **Robert Dixon, CEO,** Bowel and Bladder Foundation.

About the YouGov research

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,352 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 1st Feb – 2nd Feb 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

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