

GET MOVING:

tasty recipes to encourage good digestive transit health

By Emma Wells DipION, MBANT
Health and food writer and founder
of Smart Nutrition

One in seven people suffer from constipation,¹ with more women affected than men and elderly people over 65 years of age more prone to the condition.²

Your transit time is the length of time it takes for food to pass through the body once it has been eaten, and a slow transit time is an indication of constipation or poor transit health.

The most common known cause is a lack of fibre in the diet, but certain medications can also cause problems, especially painkillers that contain codeine, antacids and some forms of iron tablets.³ Dehydration and a sedentary, slower lifestyle do not help, especially for the elderly. Back problems can cause damage to the nerves that control the muscles of the colon, which can slow down peristalsis and cause transit health issues and problems.

Depression, hypothyroidism, Parkinson's and lupus are all diseases where constipation can be a symptom, and there are also some psychological causes of constipation.⁴ Food allergies can lead to constipation⁵ and eggs are known to have a binding effect. Processed foods that lack fibre often lead to constipation and dairy is a known cause in children.⁶ Wheat bran, although high in fibre, can cause blockages in the large intestines,⁷ so this should be avoided by those with transit health problems.

In the long term, constipation can lead to haemorrhoids or anal fissures that may cause some blood loss when a stool is passed, which can in turn lead to anaemia. If this occurs, a visit to the doctor is essential as it may be an indication of a more serious condition. When the muscles of the colon become inflamed and infected, the painful condition of diverticulitis arises, as does a risk of colon cancer as the increased

exposure of waste products to the intestinal flora can mean greater conversion to potential carcinogens.⁸

There are two types of fibre, soluble and insoluble, and both help to ease constipation. They play different roles in the body and are found together in fibre-rich foods. Insoluble fibre helps to remove toxins and also reduces pressure within the colon. This aids the transition more easily through the intestines, reducing constipation.^{9,10,11,12} Soluble fibre softens stools, speeds up elimination and delays the stomach emptying, which boosts satiety. Fibre also helps to lower cholesterol.¹³

Fermentation of dietary fibre leads to the production of short chain fatty acids, which in turn lowers colon pH.

This lower pH is conducive to the growth of good bacteria,¹⁴ which aids peristalsis and is the main component in waste, bulking the stool and leading to regular bowel movements.

The best way to ensure you are getting enough fibre is to eat a diet rich in wholegrains such as porridge, oats, brown rice, quinoa, millet and buckwheat. Root vegetables such as parsnips, carrots and celeriac as well as green leafy vegetables such as kale and spinach boost fibre in the diet, along with fruit like blackberries, papaya, figs and dried apricots and prunes. Beans, lentils and chickpeas are packed full of fibre too.

Magnesium, which is found in pumpkin and sesame seeds, swiss chard, spinach, wholegrain cereals such as oat bran, quinoa and brown rice, and beans, almonds, artichokes and figs, has been shown to increase transit speed.¹⁵ Vitamin C, found in fresh fruit and vegetables such as kiwi, berries, bell peppers, parsley, papaya, mango, cabbage and asparagus, plays this role too, but an excessive amount of vitamin C can cause diarrhoea.¹⁶

PHOTOGRAPHY MARK MOLLOY
STYLING SIAN DAVIES



Vegetable Chocolate Molé



Although we should limit the amount of sugar we have in our diet, the inclusion of chocolate in this recipe lends itself well to the slightly sweet prunes and, along with the vegetables, beans and brown rice, increases the fibre content. The chocolate and brown rice also contain high levels of magnesium, shown to help relieve constipation.¹⁷
Serves 4

METHOD Place the rice in a large saucepan of boiling water. Bring back to the boil and simmer for 25-30 minutes. Meanwhile, prepare the vegetables. Heat the oil in a large frying pan, add the onion and fry gently over a medium heat for about 5 minutes, then add the garlic and cook until slightly browned. Add the peppers, sweet potato and butternut squash and stir for 1 minute. Add the kidney beans, tomatoes and tomato purée. Cook on a medium heat for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the prunes and chocolate and continue to cook until the vegetables are soft. Strain the cooked rice and put a couple of spoonfuls on each plate. Ladle the delicious molé onto the rice and finally garnish with fresh parsley.

- 300g (dry weight) brown basmati rice
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, peeled and crushed
- 1 red pepper, de-seeded, chopped
- 1 green pepper, de-seeded, chopped
- 1 large sweet potato, washed and cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1 small butternut squash, peeled and chopped into bite-sized pieces
- 200g tin kidney beans, drained
- 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 1 tbsp tomato purée
- 6-8 prunes, finely chopped
- 40g dark chocolate (70-80 per cent cocoa solids)
- Parsley to garnish

Spiced Poached Fig with Blackberry Purée

This delicious, quick and easy-to-prepare dessert offers a fibre-rich, tasty and sweet alternative to less healthy sugar-laden puddings. Blackcurrants, figs and blackberries are all high in fibre and a portion of this pudding provides around 5g of fibre.¹⁸ When choosing your figs, look for ones that are plump and tender, have a deep colour, are free from bruises and aren't mushy. Overripe figs will take a lot less cooking time and will begin to fall apart if over-poached. This does not detract from the benefits of the figs but makes the dish look less appealing. The live yoghurt in this recipe will help to boost levels of good bacteria in the gut and is beneficial for good transit health.

Serves 4

ALSO GOOD FOR...

Figs are high in potassium, so are beneficial if you have high blood pressure. They also contain manganese, which forms part of the antioxidant enzyme superoxide dismutase so are great for protecting against damaging free radicals. The cinnamon in this recipe is good for balancing blood sugar and star anise is used as an old folk remedy for colic as it aids digestion.

- 450g of fresh or frozen blackberries
- 1 tbsp of sugar-free blackberry or blackcurrant jam
- Juice of half a large orange
- 2 sticks of cinnamon
- 4 cloves
- 1 star anise
- 8 firm, fresh figs
- 1 tbsp of crème de mure (blackberry liqueur) or crème de cassis (blackcurrant liqueur)
- 4 tbsp of live sugar-free yoghurt
- Small sprig of mint for garnish

METHOD If you have frozen berries, remove them from the freezer and leave them to defrost for a couple of hours before you begin. Once defrosted, place a few berries aside and put the rest of the berries, sugar-free jam and orange juice in a food processor and process for about a minute until smooth. Strain the purée through a fine sieve and place into a saucepan. Add the cinnamon sticks, cloves and star anise and bring to the boil, then simmer gently for 3 minutes. While it is simmering, cut the figs into quarters and remove the stalk, then gently place the figs in the saucepan – making sure they are covered with the purée and spices – and poach for 5-6 minutes, depending on their ripeness. Gently turn the figs once halfway through cooking and remove them when cooked. Add the crème de mure or cassis, reduce the berry purée to approximately 300ml, sieve the sauce to remove the spices and pour over the poached figs. Serve hot or cold with a dollop of live sugar-free yoghurt and top this with a couple of blackberries and a sprig of mint for decoration.

