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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Colostomy care (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is a colostomy?

A colostomy is an opening in the belly made by a doctor as a way for bowel movements to leave the body not through the anus. To make a colostomy, your doctor will do a procedure to make a small opening in your belly. Then they will connect your large intestine to this opening ([figure 1](#) and [figure 2](#)).

A colostomy is sometimes called a "stoma," which is a medical word that means "opening." After a colostomy is made, your bowel movements will come out through the stoma into a bag that is attached to your skin.

What will my bowel movements be like with a colostomy?

You will probably have about 4 to 8 bowel movements a day. Your bowel movements might be less solid than they used to be.

How do I manage my colostomy?

A special nurse (called an ostomy nurse) will teach you how to manage your colostomy. They will teach you:

- When and how to empty the bag that collects your bowel movements
- When and how to put on a new bag to collect your bowel movements
- How to check your stoma for problems

There are different types of colostomy bags. With some types of bags, you empty, clean, and reuse them. With other types, you throw them out after each use.

Some people worry that their bag will leak, or that other people will be able to smell their bowel movements. But this is not common. The bags are made so that they do not leak or smell.

If you have a certain type of colostomy, you might be able to manage it with a process called "irrigation." This is a way to make your bowel movements regular. It involves squirting water into your stoma on a regular basis to cause a bowel movement to happen.

What problems can happen with a colostomy?

Different problems can happen with a colostomy, either right away or years later. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any of the following symptoms or problems:

- Your stoma is swollen or larger than usual.
 - Your stoma is smaller than usual.
 - Your stoma leaks more than usual.
 - You have a rash or sores around your stoma.
 - The inside of the stoma sticks out through the opening more than usual.
 - You notice a bulge under the stoma or next to it.
 - You have sudden belly pain, cramps, or nausea.
 - You had a lot of diarrhea come out of the stoma and are dehydrated. Dehydration is when the body loses too much water. Symptoms of dehydration include not making as much urine or having dark yellow urine, or feeling thirsty, tired, dizzy, or confused.
 - You haven't had any gas or bowel movements through the stoma for 4 to 6 hours (during the day). These symptoms could mean that your stoma is blocked.
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Do I need to follow a special diet?

Probably not. But you should avoid getting constipated. (Constipation means trouble having bowel movements.) To avoid constipation, you can:

- Eat foods that have a lot of fiber ([table 1](#))
- Drink plenty of water and other fluids

The foods you eat can affect the odor of your bowel movements, and how solid or soft they are. Certain foods can also make you have more gas. The foods that can affect your bowel movements and gas are listed in the table ([table 2](#)).

What will my life be like with a colostomy?

You should be able to live an active and normal life with your colostomy. But many people worry about the following things:

- Clothes – You do not need to wear special clothes. Other people won't be able to see your bag under your clothes.
- Baths and showers – You can take a bath or shower with or without your bag on.
- Sports – You will probably be able to play most sports. You might want to wear a special belt to protect your bag and keep it in place. Doctors usually recommend that people with a colostomy not play certain contact sports (such as football) or lift weights.
- Swimming – You can swim with your bag on. Make sure to empty your bag before you swim.
- Sex – You can have sex. But you might want to wear a special wrap to protect (and cover) your bag during sex.
- Travel – When you travel, be sure to bring extra supplies to manage your colostomy. If you fly, take your supplies in your carry-on luggage.

It is normal to feel sad, upset, or worried when you have a colostomy. If you have these feelings, try to get help. You can talk with a family member, friend, or counselor. You might also find it helpful to go to a support group for people who have a colostomy.

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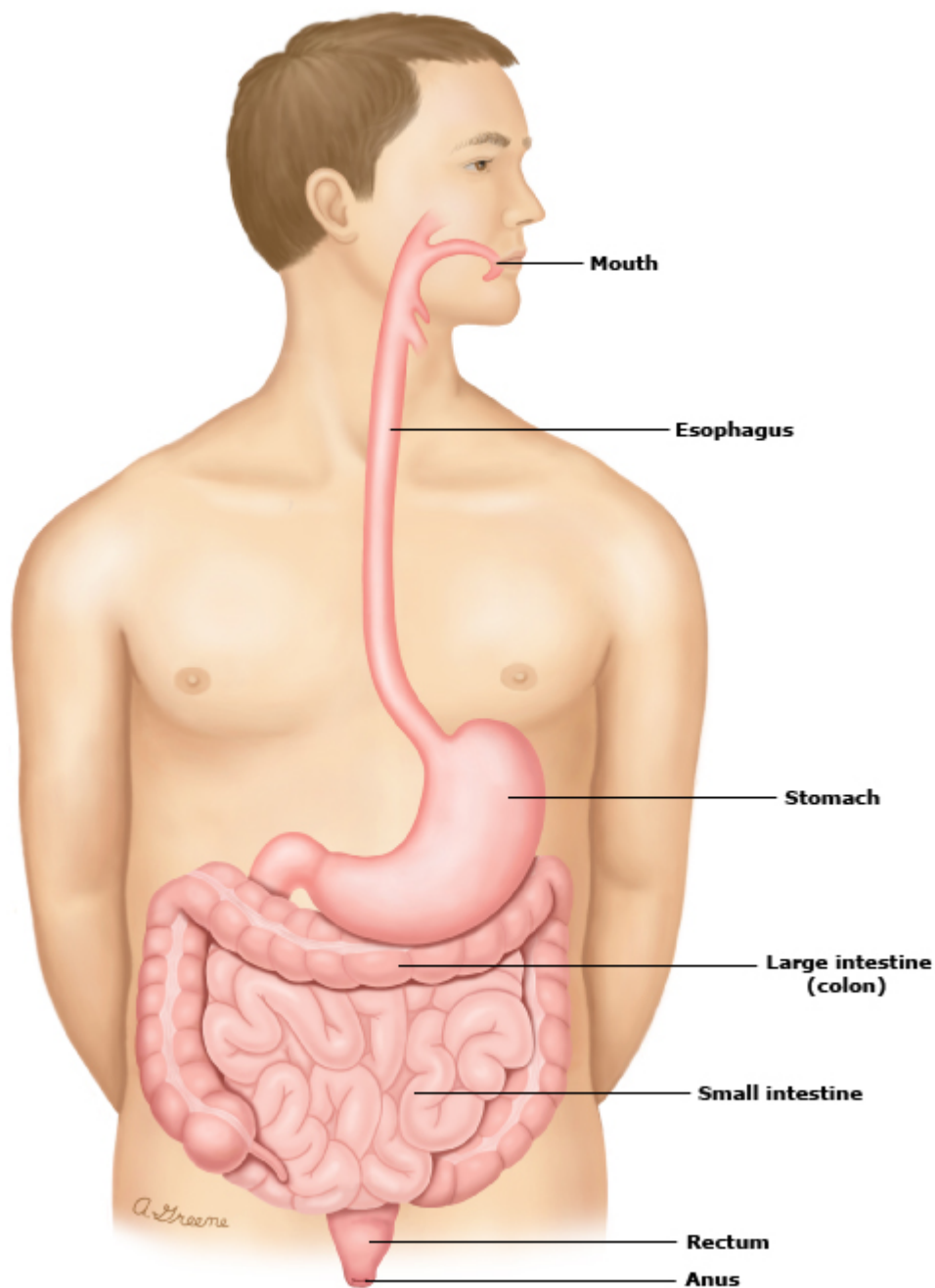
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Topic 16719 Version 10.0

GRAPHICS

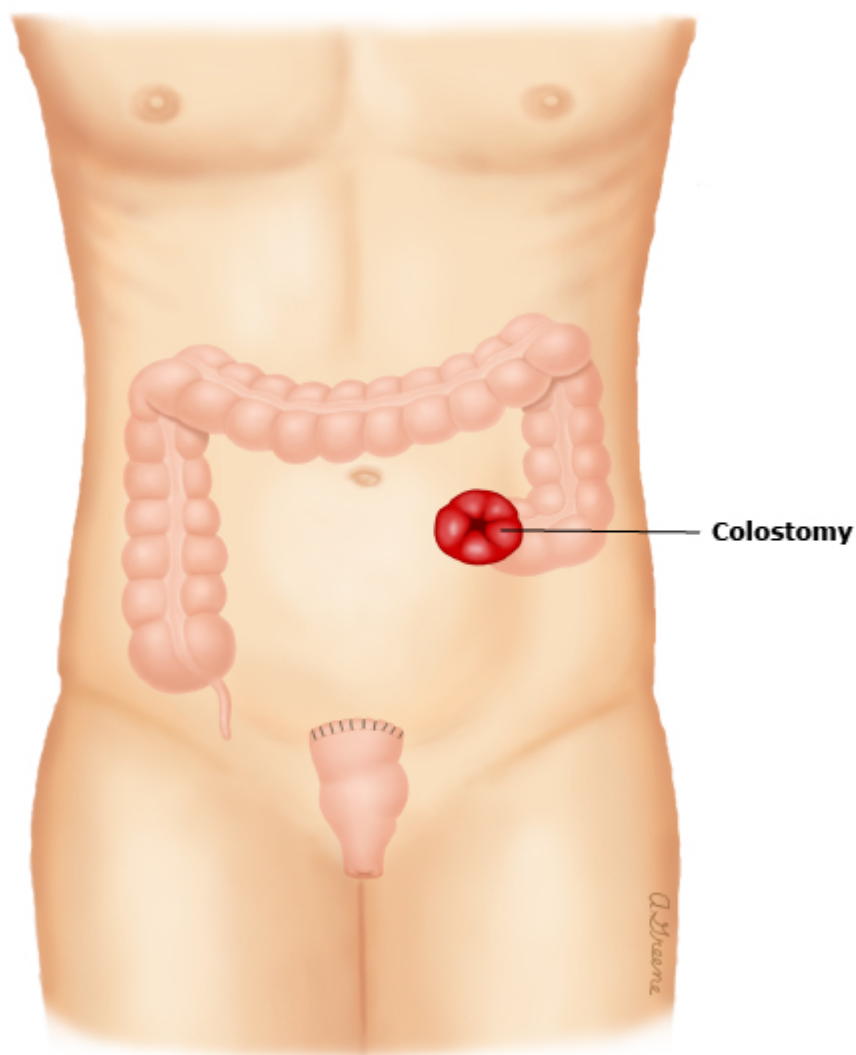
Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together, these organs are called the "digestive system" or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

Graphic 66110 Version 5.0

Colostomy



This picture shows a colostomy, which is necessary in some people with severe diverticulitis or Crohn disease, or who are being treated for colon cancer. In some people, the colostomy is temporary. In other people, the colostomy is permanent.

Graphic 57774 Version 6.0

Amount of fiber in different foods

Food	Serving	Grams of fiber
Fruits		
Apple (with skin)	1 medium apple	4.4
Banana	1 medium banana	3.1
Oranges	1 orange	3.1
Prunes	1 cup, pitted	12.4
Juices		
Apple, unsweetened, with added ascorbic acid	1 cup	0.5
Grapefruit, white, canned, sweetened	1 cup	0.2
Grape, unsweetened, with added ascorbic acid	1 cup	0.5
Orange	1 cup	0.7
Vegetables		
Cooked		
▪ Green beans	1 cup	4.0
▪ Carrots	1/2 cup sliced	2.3
▪ Peas	1 cup	8.8
▪ Potato (baked, with skin)	1 medium potato	3.8
Raw		
▪ Cucumber (with peel)	1 cucumber	1.5
▪ Lettuce	1 cup shredded	0.5
▪ Tomato	1 medium tomato	1.5
▪ Spinach	1 cup	0.7
Legumes		
▪ Baked beans, canned, no salt added	1 cup	13.9
▪ Kidney beans, canned	1 cup	13.6
▪ Lima beans, canned	1 cup	11.6
▪ Lentils, boiled	1 cup	15.6

Breads, pastas, flours		
Bran muffins	1 medium muffin	5.2
Oatmeal, cooked	1 cup	4.0
White bread	1 slice	0.6
Whole-wheat bread	1 slice	1.9
Pasta and rice, cooked		
▪ Macaroni	1 cup	2.5
▪ Rice, brown	1 cup	3.5
▪ Rice, white	1 cup	0.6
▪ Spaghetti (regular)	1 cup	2.5
Nuts		
Almonds	1/2 cup	8.7
Peanuts	1/2 cup	7.9

To learn how much fiber and other nutrients are in different foods, visit the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) FoodData Central website.

Data from: USDA FoodData Central. Available at: <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/> (Accessed on October 11, 2019).

Graphic 52349 Version 6.0

Foods that can affect bowel movements and gas

Foods that make odor worse	Foods that increase gas	Foods that make bowel movements thicker	Foods that make bowel movements looser
	Beans		
Beans	Beer and carbonated soda	Apple sauce	Green beans
Asparagus	Broccoli	Bananas	Beer
Broccoli	Brussel sprouts	Cheese	Broccoli
Brussel sprouts	Cauliflower	Boiled milk	Fresh fruits
Cauliflower	Cabbage	Marshmallows	Grape juice
Cabbage	Corn	Pasta	Raw vegetables
Eggs	Cucumbers	Creamy peanut butter	Prunes
Fish	Mushrooms	Pretzels	Spicy foods
Onions	Peas	Rice	Fried foods
Some spices	Radishes	Bread	Chocolate
	Spinach	Tapioca	Leafy green vegetables
	Dairy products	Toast	Spinach
		Yogurt	

Graphic 58115 Version 1.0

