

Over-the-counter (OTC) laxatives for constipation

Laxative Class	Examples of Laxatives	Onset of Action	Mechanism of Action	Common Adverse Effects / Side Effects	Counselling Points
Bulk-forming laxatives	Ispaghula husk, methylcellulose and sterculia	2-3 days	Increase faecal mass which stimulates peristalsis	Flatulence and abdominal distension	Drink adequate amounts of fluid to avoid intestinal obstruction Do not take before bedtime
Stimulant laxatives	Bisacodyl, docusate sodium, glycerol, senna, and sodium picosulfate	6-12 hours Suppositories 15-60 minutes	Increase intestinal motility by directly stimulating the colonic nerves Docusate sodium acts both as a stimulant and as a softening agent Glycerol acts as a rectal stimulant	Abdominal pain	Take at bedtime to produce an effect the next morning
Faecal softeners	Liquid paraffin (should not be recommended – see adverse / side effects) and docusate sodium	1-2 days	Docusate sodium acts as a faecal softener by lowering the surface tension which allows fluid to penetrate the stool, thereby softening the stool. Docusate sodium also has mild stimulant action	Liquid Paraffin: anal seepage and irritation, granulomatous reactions caused by absorption of small quantities of liquid paraffin, lipoid pneumonia, and malabsorption of fat-soluble vitamins	
Osmotic laxatives	Lactulose, macrogols and magnesium salts	1-3 days Magnesium salts – few hours	Retain fluid in the bowel by osmosis or alter the pattern of water distribution in the faeces	Flatulence, bloating, abdominal cramps	Drink adequate amounts of fluid