

Gut Health Power Up with Constipation “Superfoods”



March is National Nutrition Month®, a campaign of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics to help everyone learn about healthful eating patterns and informed dietary choices. The theme for this year is “Discover the Power of Nutrition,” which focuses on the power that nutrition holds to impact the health of individuals and communities. Nutrition has the power to fuel us through the day, help manage or prevent certain chronic diseases, and to bring us together socially and culturally.

This article focuses on one area in which we can use nutrition to power up our health – specifically, gut health and constipation. There is a lot of information online about foods that help constipation. But is there any truth to this online onslaught of tips and tricks? While no definition for a “superfood” exists, there are foods that can help ease constipation.

What is constipation?

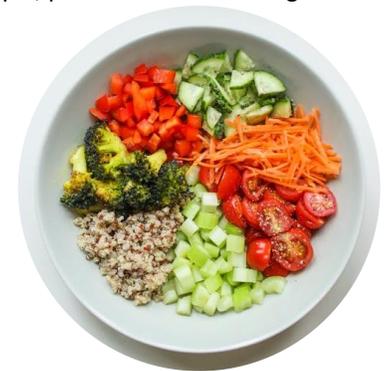
Constipation is usually defined as having less than three bowel movements per week or having difficulty passing stools. It can be an uncomfortable and frustrating condition to manage. Nutrition is an important part of a constipation toolkit, along with medical management with your healthcare provider and stress management.

Drinking enough fluid and eating enough fiber are two general recommendations to improve constipation. On average, a person should aim to drink 8-10 cups (64-80

oz) of fluid per day. Water is the best choice for most people, but zero or low-calorie drinks can also be a way to meet fluid goals. Being well hydrated is important so that the fiber in our diet can do its job – fiber does not work well when we are dehydrated!

Fiber comes from plant foods – fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, and seeds. Fiber helps to add bulk to our stool that lets our body know that it needs to move things along in our large intestine (colon) to have a bowel movement. It also pulls water into the colon to help keep stool moist and moving along. Most adults need about 25-35 grams of fiber daily.

Getting enough fluid and fiber is important to preventing and managing constipation, and no single food alone will fix constipation. But, this article will take a deeper dive into three foods that pack a bit of an extra punch when it comes to combating constipation: prunes, kiwi, and chia seeds. These foods may not be the best for everyone – for example, prunes and kiwi are high in potassium, which some folks with chronic kidney disease (CKD) may need to limit. If you are not sure if adding these foods to your diet is a good option for you, talk with your healthcare provider.



Prunes

Prunes are a classic for constipation. While prunes do contain fiber, their main power-up for constipation is that they are a natural source of sorbitol. Sorbitol helps to gently draw water into the colon which helps encourage a bowel movement.

Some people do have trouble tolerating sorbitol because it is easily fermented by our good gut bacteria, which produces gas. Normally, it is positive to feed our good gut bacteria! But some people, particularly those with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), may have discomfort or excess bloating with high intake of sorbitol.



To try prunes for constipation, try 5-6 prunes in the morning. You can heat the prunes with some water in the microwave and mash with a fork if you need a softer texture. You can start slowly with 2-3 prunes and work up as needed.

Kiwi

Kiwi is another powerhouse for constipation. The reason it is helpful is not fully understood. Early animal studies show that an enzyme called actinidin may help with keeping things moving in the colon and having a bowel movement, but this has not yet been proven in humans. The fiber and fluid in the fruit are also helpful. Two medium kiwis provide about 5 grams of fiber. Much of this fiber has high water holding capacity, which helps to bulk the stool and encourage the colon to move things along for a bowel movement.¹ While we do not fully understand why it is helpful, studies do show improvement in constipation with kiwi intake. One study found eating 2 kiwi per day significantly increased the frequency of bowel movements and decreased the amount of time it takes stool to move through the colon in adults with constipation-predominant IBS;² improvements in constipation were also seen in other studies involving consumption of 2 kiwi/day.^{3,4}



Kiwi can be great on its own, as a topper over yogurt, or in a smoothie. If you are making a smoothie, you can keep the skin on for an extra boost of fiber. If you would like to eat the skin on a fresh kiwi but are uncertain about the texture, golden kiwis have a thinner, less fuzzy skin that may be more palatable.

Chia Seeds

Chia seeds have received a lot of attention for health benefits in recent years, but their history goes back centuries as a culturally and nutritionally valuable food in both Mayan and Aztec civilizations. In addition to

fiber, chia seeds are sources of plant-based protein and omega-3 fatty acids as well as lots of vitamins and minerals, including calcium and iron.

Chia seeds are packed with fiber, about 8 grams of fiber per 2 tablespoons (tbsp). The soluble fiber in chia seeds is viscous, meaning it retains water and thickens into a gel when mixed with water. When consumed, this helps add bulk and moisture to the stool to encourage a bowel movement.



It is not necessary to soak chia seeds in water until they gel before eating them, but many people find this makes them more comfortable to digest. Regardless of soaking chia seeds, chia seeds should be consumed with ample water (adding 8 oz water to your daily hydration intake per 1 tbsp chia seeds added to your diet is a good rule of thumb) to make sure there is enough fluid for the fiber in the chia seeds to be helpful. If lots of chia seeds are eaten while a person is dehydrated, it can worsen constipation. Just like with increasing any dietary fiber, starting slowly can improve tolerance. Some people may be able to start with 1 tbsp chia seeds, but others may do best starting with ½ teaspoon and gradually increasing to 1-2 tbsp per day. Try chia seeds in yogurt, oatmeal, a smoothie, over a salad, or make a jam or pudding with chia seeds:

- Chia seed jam: [10-Minute Chia Jam](#)
- Chia pudding: [Cocoa-Chia Pudding](#)

References:

1. Wilkinson-Smith V, Dellschaft N, Ansell J, et al. Mechanisms underlying effects of kiwifruit on intestinal function shown by MRI in healthy volunteers. *Aliment Pharmacol Ther.* 2019;49(6):759-768. doi:10.1111/apt.15127
2. Chang, C.C., et al., Kiwifruit improves bowel function in patients with irritable bowel syndrome with constipation. *Asia Pac J Clin Nutr.* 2010. 19(4): p. 451-7.
3. Chan AO, Leung G, Tong T, Wong NY. Increasing dietary fiber intake in terms of kiwifruit improves constipation in Chinese patients. *World J Gastroenterol.* 2007;13(35):4771-4775. doi:10.3748/wjg.v13.i35.4771.
4. Geary R, Fukudo S, Barbara G, et al. Consumption of 2 Green Kiwifruits Daily Improves Constipation and Abdominal Comfort-Results of an International Multicenter Randomized Controlled Trial. *Am J Gastroenterol.* 2023;118(6):1058-1068.

Would you like to work with a Registered Dietitian?

To schedule an appointment, please obtain a referral for **Medical Nutrition Therapy** and contact:
412-692-4497 (Oakland) OR 412-623-2421 (Shadyside)