



# Patient education: Living with a colostomy (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What is a colostomy?

This is an opening in the belly the doctor makes so bowel movements can leave the body not through the anus. To make a colostomy, the doctor does a procedure to make a small opening in the belly. Then, they connect the large intestine to this opening ( [figure 1](#) and [figure 2](#)).

The hole in the skin is sometimes called a "stoma." This is the medical term for "opening." Bowel movements come out through the stoma into a bag that is attached to the skin.

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## What will my bowel movements be like with a colostomy?

How often you have bowel movements varies. Your bowel movements might be less solid than they used to be. You might also occasionally have a bowel movement the "regular" way, through the anus. This is normal.

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## How do I take care of the colostomy?

A special type of nurse called an "ostomy nurse" or a "wound, ostomy, and continence nurse" will teach you how to:

- Empty the bag
- Change the bag
- Care for your skin
- Check the stoma for problems

There are different types of colostomy bags ( [figure 3](#)). With some types, you empty, clean, and reuse them. With other types, you throw them away after each use.

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

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

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## **What problems can happen with a colostomy?**

Different problems can happen, either right away or years later. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any of these symptoms or problems:

- The stoma is swollen or larger than usual, or the inside of the stoma sticks out through the opening more than usual.
  - There is bulge under the stoma or next to it.
  - The stoma is smaller than usual.
  - The stoma leaks more than usual.
  - You have a rash or sores around the stoma.
  - You have sudden belly pain, cramps, or nausea.
  - You have more diarrhea coming out of the stoma than normal – This can cause you to lose too much fluid, which can lead to problems. Symptoms of fluid loss include not making as much urine, having dark yellow urine, or feeling thirsty, tired, dizzy, or confused.
  - You haven't had any gas or bowel movements through the stoma for a while, and you have bloating, nausea, or pain – These could mean there is a blockage in your intestine.
  - The stoma turns purple or black instead of pink.
  - The stoma bleeds or has bloody fluid coming from it.
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## **Do I need to follow a special diet?**

Probably not. But avoid getting constipated. (This means trouble having bowel movements.)

To avoid constipation, you should:

- 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. These foods are listed in the table ( [table 2](#)).

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## What will my life be like with a colostomy?

You should be able to live an active and normal life. But many people worry about these things:

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

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: How to care for an ostomy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Colectomy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Colon and rectal cancer \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Crohn disease in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

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Patient education: Gas and bloating (The Basics)  
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Patient education: Living with an ileostomy (The Basics)

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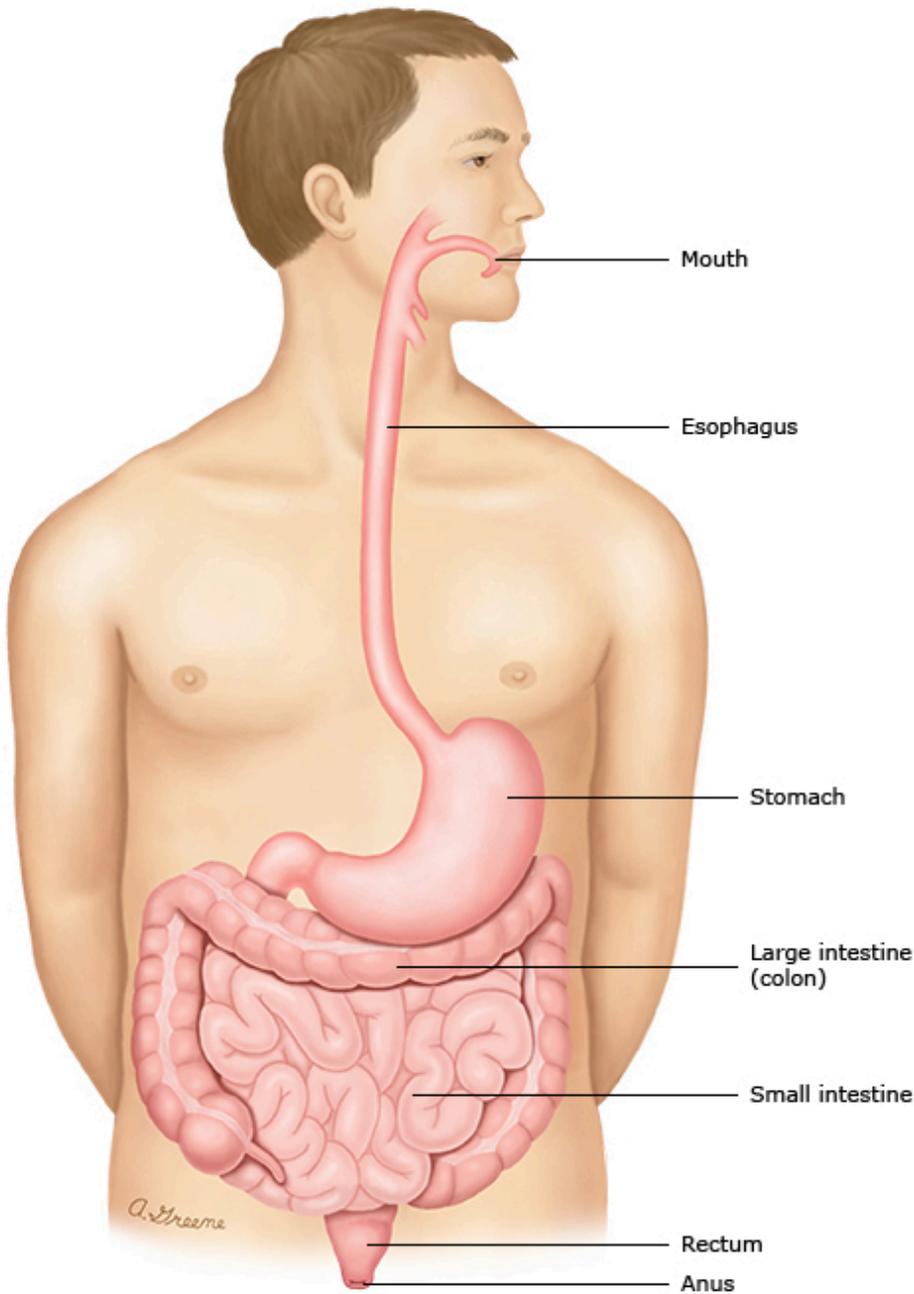
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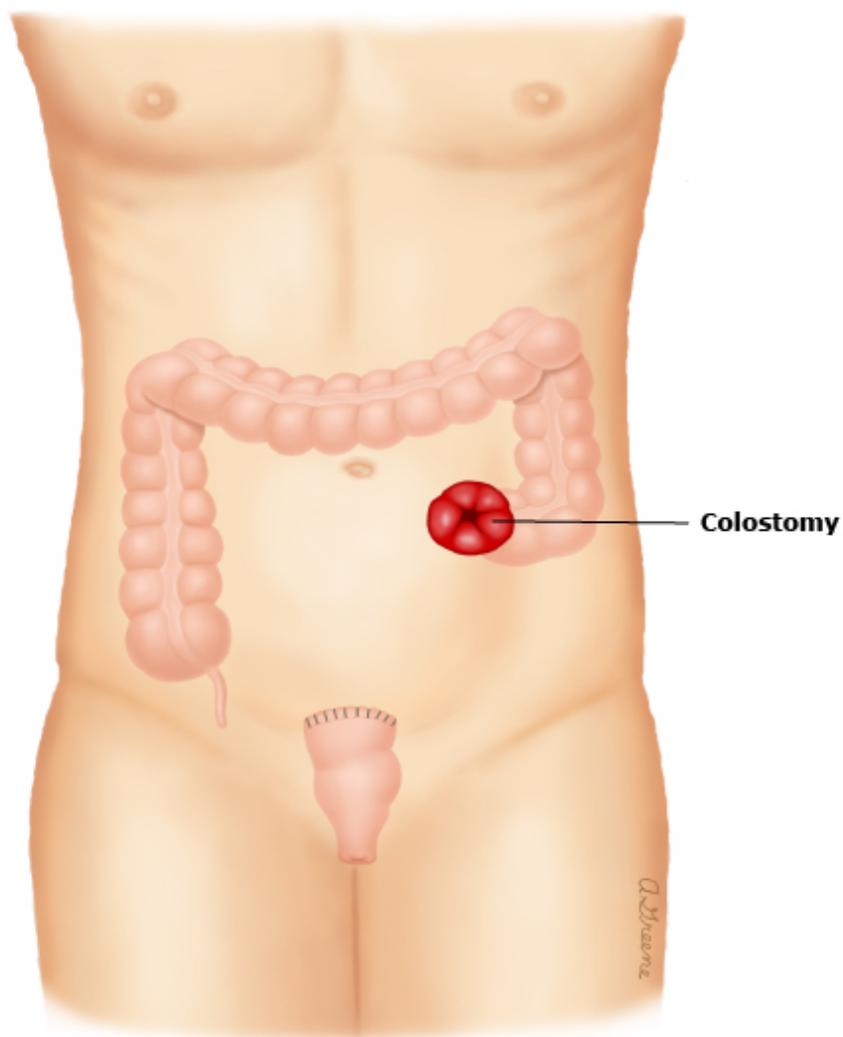
## GRAPHICS

Figure 1: Digestive system



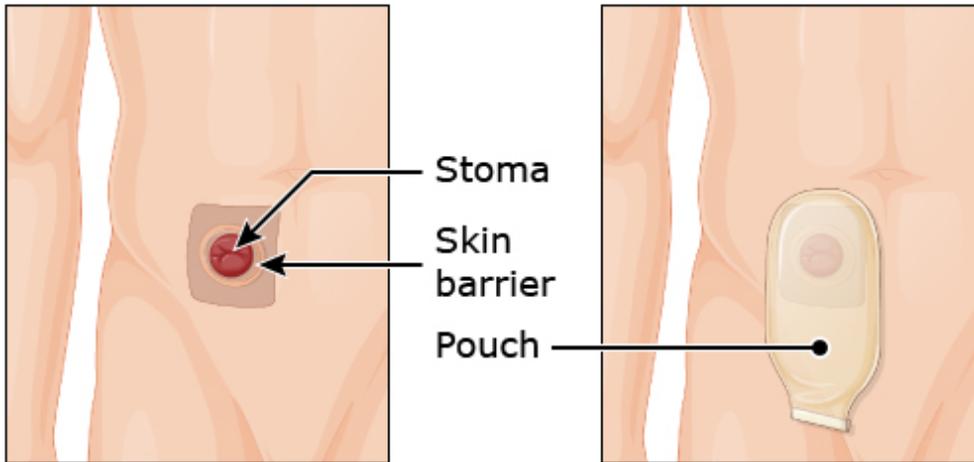
This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together, these organs are called the "digestive system" or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water. The liver, pancreas, and gallbladder are also part of the digestive system (not shown in this drawing).

Figure 2: **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.

Figure 3: Ostomy bag system



1-piece system



2-piece system



Each ostomy bag system has a "skin barrier" or "wafer" to protect the skin and a "bag" or "pouch" to collect bowel movements or urine. An ostomy system can be 1-piece, where the skin barrier and the bag are a single unit, or 2-piece, where the skin barrier and the bag join together. They can close with a separate clip or have a closure system as a part of the bag.

Table 1: Amount of fiber in different foods

Food	Serving	Grams of fiber
<b>Fruits</b>		
Apple (with skin)	1 medium apple	4.4 g
Avocado	1/2 cup	5.0 g
Banana	1 medium banana	3.1 g
Blueberries	1 cup	3.6 g
Oranges	1 orange	3.1 g
Pear (with skin)	1 medium pear	5.5 g
Prunes	1 cup (pitted)	12.4 g
Raspberries	1 cup	8.0 g
Strawberries	1/2 cup	2.0 g
<b>Juices</b>		
Apple (unsweetened, with added ascorbic acid)	1 cup	0.5 g
Grapefruit (white, canned, sweetened)	1 cup	0.2 g
Grape (unsweetened, with added ascorbic acid)	1 cup	0.5 g
Orange (with pulp)	1 cup	0.7 g
Prune	1 cup	2.6 g
<b>Vegetables</b>		
<b>Cooked</b>		
▪ Carrots	1/2 cup (sliced)	2.3 g
▪ Corn	1/2 cup	2.0 g
▪ Green beans	1 cup	4.0 g
▪ Peas	1 cup	8.8 g
▪ Potato (baked, with skin)	1 medium potato	3.8 g
<b>Raw</b>		
▪ Broccoli	1/2 cup	2.6 g
▪ Celery	1 cup	2.0 g
▪ Cucumber (with peel)	1 cucumber	1.5 g

▪ Lettuce	1 cup (shredded)	0.5 g
▪ Spinach	1 cup	0.7 g
▪ Tomato	1 medium tomato	1.5 g
<b>Legumes</b>		
▪ Baked beans (canned, no salt added)	1/2 cup	5.6 g
▪ Black beans (cooked)	1/2 cup	7.5 g
▪ Chickpeas (cooked)	1/2 cup	6.2 g
▪ Kidney beans (canned)	1/2 cup	5.7 g
▪ Lentils (boiled)	1/2 cup	7.8 g
▪ Lima beans (canned)	1/2 cup	6.6 g
▪ Navy beans (cooked)	1/2 cup	9.5 g
<b>Breads, pastas, flours</b>		
Bran muffins	1 medium muffin	5.2 g
Bread (rye)	1 slice	2.0 g
Bread (white)	1 slice	0.6 g
Bread (whole wheat)	1 slice	1.9 g
Bulgur (cooked)	1/2 cup	4.1 g
Cracker (rye wafers)	2 crackers	5.0 g
Oatmeal (cooked)	1 cup	4.0 g
<b>Pasta and rice (cooked)</b>		
▪ Macaroni	1 cup	2.5 g
▪ Rice (brown)	1 cup	3.5 g
▪ Rice (white)	1 cup	0.6 g
▪ Spaghetti (regular)	1 cup	2.5 g
▪ Spaghetti (whole wheat)	1 cup	5.4 g
Pearl barley (cooked)	1 cup	6.0 g
Popcorn (air popped)	3 cups	3.6 g
<b>Breakfast cereals*</b>		
Bran flakes	3/4 cup	5.5 g

"High-fiber" cereals	1/2 cup	14 g
Instant oatmeal	1 pouch (43 g)	3.0 g
Other cereals	1/2 cup	3.0 to 7.5 g
<b>Nuts</b>		
Almonds	1/2 cup	8.7 g
Peanuts	1/2 cup	7.9 g

There are 2 kinds of fiber:

- "Soluble fiber" is found in fruits, oats, barley, beans, and peas. It can help heart health, including lowering cholesterol.
- "Insoluble fiber" is found in wheat, rye, and other grains. It can help with constipation.

The exact amount of fiber in a food depends on the specific product and brand. To learn how much fiber and other nutrients are in different foods, visit the [United States Department of Agriculture FoodData Central website](https://fdc.nal.usda.gov).

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\* Ready-to-eat breakfast cereals have a wide range of fiber content. Types with high fiber content typically include bran (wheat or oat) and/or oat fiber. Check the nutrition label of each brand for actual fiber content.

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*Data from: USDA FoodData Central. Available at: <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov> (Accessed on December 6, 2024).*

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**Table 2: Foods that can affect bowel movements and gas**

<b>Foods that make odor worse</b>	<b>Foods that increase gas</b>	<b>Foods that make bowel movements thicker</b>	<b>Foods that make bowel movements looser</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Asparagus</li> <li>▪ Beans</li> <li>▪ Broccoli</li> <li>▪ Brussels sprouts</li> <li>▪ Cabbage</li> <li>▪ Cauliflower</li> <li>▪ Eggs</li> <li>▪ Fish</li> <li>▪ Onions</li> <li>▪ Some spices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Beans</li> <li>▪ Beer and carbonated soda</li> <li>▪ Broccoli</li> <li>▪ Brussels sprouts</li> <li>▪ Cabbage</li> <li>▪ Cauliflower</li> <li>▪ Corn</li> <li>▪ Cucumbers</li> <li>▪ Dairy products</li> <li>▪ Mushrooms</li> <li>▪ Peas</li> <li>▪ Radishes</li> <li>▪ Spinach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Applesauce</li> <li>▪ Bananas</li> <li>▪ Boiled milk</li> <li>▪ Bread</li> <li>▪ Cheese</li> <li>▪ Creamy peanut butter</li> <li>▪ Marshmallows</li> <li>▪ Pasta</li> <li>▪ Pretzels</li> <li>▪ Rice</li> <li>▪ Tapioca</li> <li>▪ Toast</li> <li>▪ Yogurt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Beer</li> <li>▪ Broccoli</li> <li>▪ Chocolate</li> <li>▪ Fresh fruits</li> <li>▪ Fried foods</li> <li>▪ Grape juice</li> <li>▪ Green beans</li> <li>▪ Leafy green vegetables</li> <li>▪ Prunes</li> <li>▪ Raw vegetables</li> <li>▪ Spicy foods</li> <li>▪ Spinach</li> </ul>

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