

Constipated? Try These Sitting Positions

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Modern toilets force an unnatural sitting position that contributes to constipation. Adopting a squatting-like posture straightens the anorectal angle, allowing for easier and more complete bowel movements
- › Squatting during elimination offers multiple health benefits, including reduced risk of hemorrhoids, pelvic floor disorders and diverticulosis. It also promotes faster evacuation and better overall digestive health
- › Simple modifications like using a footstool, sitting with one leg crossed over the other or leaning forward can mimic the benefits of squatting on a standard toilet. These changes can lead to improved bowel habits for many individuals
- › Constipation isn't just about frequency; it involves hard, dry stools, straining and feelings of incomplete evacuation. Chronic constipation can lead to serious health issues and should be addressed
- › Natural strategies for combating constipation include staying hydrated, increasing fiber intake, regular exercise and paying attention to your body's rhythms. Consistency in these practices can improve digestive health over time

You might not give much thought to your toilet habits, but the way you sit on the throne significantly impacts your digestive health. If you're struggling with constipation, the solution may be simpler than you think. The modern pedestal toilet, while convenient, might be working against your body's natural design. Let's explore how a small change in your sitting position could lead to big improvements in your bowel movements.

The human body evolved to eliminate waste in a squatting position. This natural posture aligns your intestines in a way that makes evacuation faster, easier and more complete.¹

When you sit on a standard toilet, however, you're forced into an unnatural position that hinders the process. This misalignment contributes to constipation, straining and incomplete evacuation – all of which can lead to more serious digestive issues over time.

The Anorectal Angle: Your Body's Natural Valve

Understanding the importance of the anorectal angle is key to grasping why your sitting position matters so much. This angle acts as a natural valve, helping to maintain continence when you're not ready to evacuate. When you sit on a typical toilet, this angle remains partially kinked, requiring you to strain to overcome the obstruction.

This straining isn't just uncomfortable – it can lead to issues like hemorrhoids and pelvic floor disorders.² In contrast, squatting straightens the anorectal angle, allowing for a clear pathway and effortless elimination.

This natural alignment means you don't have to push or strain, reducing your risk of common bowel-related health problems. By adopting a squatting-like position, even on a modern toilet, you can mimic this natural alignment and alleviate constipation and other digestive discomforts.

The Multiple Benefits of Squatting

While alleviating constipation is a primary benefit of adopting a more natural toilet posture, the advantages extend far beyond just easier bowel movements. Proper alignment during elimination can help prevent a host of other health issues.

For instance, the reduced straining associated with a squatting-like position can lower your risk of developing hemorrhoids,³ a common and uncomfortable condition often

exacerbated by prolonged sitting and pushing on the toilet. Additionally, this improved posture helps maintain the health of your pelvic floor muscles.

These muscles play a role in supporting your pelvic organs and controlling bladder and bowel function. By reducing the strain on these muscles during bowel movements, you decrease your risk of developing pelvic organ prolapse, a condition more common in women but that can affect anyone. This natural posture also offers an additional range of health benefits that address various aspects of your digestive and pelvic health:⁴

- 1. Faster and more convenient evacuation** – The aligned posture allows for quicker and more efficient bowel movements.
- 2. Prevention of fecal stagnation** – By promoting complete evacuation, squatting reduces your risk of fecal buildup, which can contribute to conditions like irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease and even colon cancer.
- 3. Protection of pelvic nerves** – The squatting position helps prevent stretching and damage to the nerves that control your urogenital organs, including the prostate, bladder and uterus.
- 4. Maintenance of a healthy ileocecal valve** – Squatting temporarily blocks this valve between your colon and small intestine, minimizing the risk of bacterial contamination.
- 5. Enhanced continence** – The posture relaxes the puborectalis muscle, which typically constricts your rectum, improving overall bowel control.

Further, for pregnant women, squatting can help alleviate pressure on the uterus during toilet use, reducing discomfort. Regular squatting is also beneficial for women preparing for natural delivery, as it helps strengthen relevant muscles and improves flexibility.

Beyond Constipation: The Link to Diverticulosis

While the benefits of squatting for constipation relief are well-documented, recent studies have explored its potential role in preventing diverticulosis. Diverticulosis is a condition where small, bulging pouches develop in the lining of your digestive system, most commonly in your colon.

A study conducted at Hacettepe University in Turkey found a significant correlation between toilet type and the development of diverticular disease.⁵ The study revealed that patients who used Western-style toilets (sitting position) had a higher risk of developing diverticulosis compared to those who used traditional Turkish-style toilets (squatting position).

Moreover, the risk increased with the duration of Western-style toilet use, suggesting that the long-term effects of your toilet habits may extend beyond immediate digestive comfort and could influence the structural health of your colon.

Among patients with diverticulosis, those using Western-style toilets had a predominance of left-sided diverticula. This aligns with the "anorectal angle and relaxation" hypothesis, further supporting the idea that your defecation posture can have specific and localized effects on your digestive system.

Modifying Your Toilet Posture: Simple Tweaks for Better Health

While completely switching to a squat toilet might not be practical for everyone, there are simple ways to modify your posture on a standard toilet to achieve similar benefits. One effective method is to use a small footstool or specially designed toilet stool to elevate your feet while sitting. This position brings your knees above your hips, more closely mimicking a natural squatting position.

A study conducted at The Ohio State University looked into the effectiveness of devices that modify your posture on the toilet, essentially mimicking a squatting position.⁶ The study involved 52 participants who used a defecation postural modification device (DPMD) for two weeks. The results were striking: participants experienced increased

bowel emptiness, reduced straining and shorter time spent on the toilet when using the device.

You might think that only those with diagnosed digestive issues would benefit from such interventions. However, the research revealed some surprising statistics about the participants' baseline bowel habits.

Over half of the study participants reported finding blood on their toilet paper in the past year, while a quarter experienced incomplete emptying, and nearly half indicated increased straining during bowel movements.⁷ These findings suggest that even if you consider your digestive health to be normal, you might still be experiencing suboptimal bowel function without realizing it.

Using a DPMD or adopting a squatting position could improve your bowel habits, even if you don't currently experience noticeable digestive discomfort. This simple change in posture could lead to more complete evacuation, reduced straining and overall improved digestive health for a wide range of individuals.

If you don't have a stool, another technique is to lean forward slightly while on the toilet, resting your elbows on your knees. This posture helps to relax the puborectalis muscle, which is responsible for maintaining the anorectal angle.

By relaxing this muscle, you create a straighter path for waste to pass through, easing constipation and reducing the need for straining. These simple modifications can make a significant difference in your toilet experience, reducing the time you spend on the toilet and increasing the completeness of your bowel movements.

Innovative Sitting Techniques: Thinking Outside the Bowl

While elevating your feet with a stool is one way to improve your toilet posture, some medical professionals have suggested other innovative approaches to address constipation. These techniques also aim to mimic the benefits of squatting while using a standard toilet, offering alternative solutions for those struggling with occasional bowel movement difficulties.

One such method involves sitting with one leg crossed over the other, creating a pseudo-squatting position.⁸ This adjustment changes the angle of your rectum and relaxes key muscles involved in elimination. By adopting this posture, you may find that you're able to pass stools more easily and with less strain.

Another technique gaining attention is a twist on the cross-legged position. In this approach, you place one foot on the opposite knee and gently twist your torso toward your raised leg.⁹ This position provides a form of self-massage to your abdominal area, aiding in the movement of stool through your intestines.

These unconventional sitting methods work by increasing intra-abdominal pressure and altering the alignment of your digestive tract. While they may feel a bit awkward at first, many people report finding relief from mild constipation by incorporating these techniques into their bathroom routine.

It's important to remember that while these methods are useful for occasional constipation, they're not a substitute for addressing underlying health issues. Passing stools that are hard and dry, requiring strain to expel, characterizes constipation.

This condition typically involves less frequent bowel movements than usual. It's important to note that straining during defecation isn't normal, nor are sensations of incomplete evacuation, bloating, cramping or feeling sluggish after using the bathroom. As you age, particularly beyond 65, your likelihood of experiencing constipation increases considerably.

If left untreated over time, chronic constipation can result in fecal impaction, a potentially serious medical issue. It's advisable to avoid laxatives whenever possible and only use them as a final option. Should you find it absolutely necessary to use a laxative, ensure it's only for a very brief duration.

If you find yourself frequently struggling with constipation, it's important to consult with a holistic health care provider. They can help identify any underlying causes and develop a comprehensive treatment plan that includes dietary changes and lifestyle modifications.

Common Causes of Constipation¹⁰

Lifestyle

Diseases and Conditions

Change in diet, less fiber, less fruits and vegetables

Pregnancy, childbirth or hormonal disturbances

Emotional stress

Problems with the muscles or nerve in the intestine, rectum or anus

Ignoring the urge to "go," travel and scheduling factors that cause you to hold it

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

Insufficient exercise

Neurologic disorders

Inadequate hydration

Hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid)

Calcium or iron supplements

Local pain or discomfort around the anus, such as from fissures or hemorrhoids

Drugs such as narcotic painkillers (codeine, for example), diuretics, antacids, antidepressants and excess or overused laxatives

Colorectal cancer

Food allergies

Multiple organ diseases, such as lupus and scleroderma

Embracing Natural Habits for Optimal Elimination

Adopting a more natural toilet posture is just one aspect of reconnecting with your body's innate wisdom for proper elimination. This simple change can serve as a gateway to exploring other natural health practices that align with your body's design. By paying

attention to this often-overlooked aspect of daily life, you're taking a proactive step toward better overall health.

Remember, it's not just about treating symptoms but about addressing the root causes of health issues. Constipation and other digestive problems are often signs that something in your lifestyle isn't quite right. To overcome constipation and promote optimal bowel function, stay well-hydrated, as water helps soften stools and promotes regular bowel movements.

Additionally, increasing your fiber intake through whole foods like fruits and vegetables can add bulk to your stool and help it move more easily through your digestive tract. Regular exercise is another powerful tool in combating constipation.¹¹ Physical activity stimulates the muscles in your intestines, promoting better digestion and more frequent bowel movements. Even a daily walk can make a difference.

Lastly, pay attention to your body's natural rhythms and don't ignore the urge to go when it arises. By combining these natural strategies with improved toilet posture, you're giving your body the best chance to maintain regular, healthy bowel movements. Remember, consistency is key – make these practices part of your daily routine, and you'll likely see improvements in your digestive health over time.

Sources and References

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- ¹¹ [Scand J Gastroenterol. 2019 Feb;54\(2\):169-177](#)