Nutrition for bowel after a spinal cord injury

Learn about your bowel function
Understand how your bowel now works. Learn how cares and medications affect it.

Time your meal to help with cares
A meal and/or warm drink 20-30 minutes before starting your cares may help your bowel to move.

Have a regular meal pattern
Have breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. Eat at similar times each day and choose similar amounts and types of food.

Be physically active
When you move it encourages your gut to move also. Being up also helps gravity to move the bowels.

Allow time to trial changes
Make dietary changes one at a time and allow 1 week to see what effect they will have your bowel routine.

Keep a diary if having problems
Record what you eat and drink, your bowels, medications and cares. This can help you identify problems.
Stool form

Food and fluid can help you achieve the right stool form. This will help you to avoid bowel accidents and reduce the risk of other bowel problems. The Bristol Stool Chart (below) helps to describe stool form.

The type of stool that is best depends on what type of bowel you have:
- If you have an upper motor neuron bowel (reflex bowel), aim for type 4 stool
- If you have a lower motor neuron bowel (flaccid or areflexic bowel), aim for type 3 stool
- Those with an incomplete spinal cord injury, or an injury at level T10-T12 may have mixed bowel function. If your anal muscles are more flaccid and you require manual evacuation, aim for type 3 stool. Otherwise, aim for type 4 stool

A number of things may cause Type 7 stool:
- Certain medications
- Overflow diarrhoea from severe constipation
- Illness affecting your bowel (eg. food poisoning, “tummy bug”).
If your stool is too hard

**Eat breakfast**
Breakfast is a very high fibre meal. If timed correctly, it may also help the bowel to move during morning cares.

**Increase your fibre intake slowly**
Making sudden changes may lead to bowel accidents.

**Have enough fluid**
Not having enough to drink can cause hard stool. A high fibre diet will not work if your fluid intake is poor.

**Find the right balance**
Not everyone with a spinal cord injury needs the same amount of fibre. Changes to your medications and physical activity can also affect how much you need.
How to increase your fibre intake

Fibre comes from plant foods. It is not absorbed into your body but is important for bowel health. Fibre supports a regular bowel habit and appropriate stool form.

1. Start by having enough fruit and vegetables

1 serving = 1 handful

Every day have:
- 2 – 4 servings of fresh fruit
- At least 3 servings of non-starchy vegetables

2. Choose wholegrain breads and cereals

3. Include beans and lentils in your diet
High fibre breakfast ideas

- bran cereals
- muesli
- Wheat biscuits
- porridge (not instant)
- beans on grainy toast
- peanut butter on grainy toast
- fruit and grain toast

Include a handful of fruit (eat with skin where possible)

- fresh fruit
- fruit compote
- tinned fruit
- stewed fruit
- frozen berries
**High fibre lunch ideas**

- Use grainy bread in sandwiches and filled rolls
- Include salad in your sandwich or on the side
- Try a baked jacket potato with vegetables or baked beans
- Enjoy homemade vegetable soup
- Add frozen vegetables to noodles
High fibre snack ideas

• Fresh fruit

• ¼ cup raw nuts or seeds*

• ¼ cup dried fruit*

• Grainy cracker with hummus*  

• Vegetable sticks

• Yoghurt topped with muesli

• Bran muffin*

• Muesli bar* (check nutrition information using this guide)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nutrition information</th>
<th>Per serving</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Less than 600kJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protein</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>- saturated</td>
<td>Less than 2g</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carbohydrate</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>- sugars</td>
<td>Less than 10g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>Less than 150mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibre</td>
<td>More than 1.5g</td>
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* These foods can be high in calories. If you are trying to lose weight, limit the amount you eat. Check the nutrition panel on muesli bar packets.
High fibre dinner ideas

- Fill half your plate with non-starchy vegetables
- Leave the skin on vegetables
- Garnish salads with seeds, nuts or toasted chick peas
- Choose wholemeal pasta or brown rice
- If having dessert, make it fruity
If your stool is too soft

Check your medications
If you are still taking oral laxatives, these should be reviewed before changing your diet

We are all different
Be aware that different foods effect people differently. What is a problem food for someone else might not be a problem for you

Trial and error
Only remove 1 food from your diet at a time. Otherwise, you may end up avoiding foods that are not causing any problem
Dietary changes you can try

1. Start by limiting stimulant food and drinks

Dried fruit  prunes  kiwifruit  juice  coffee  energy drinks  alcohol  fizzy drinks  chocolate  sugarfree gum  artificial sweetener  very spicy food

2. Balance your intake of high fibre foods

Fruit: Limit to 2 servings per day  
Vegetables: Limit to 3 servings per day  
1 serving = 1 cupped handful

Choose mostly white bread, rice and pasta. Peel potatoes and kumara. Avoid bran based breakfast cereals

A supplement high in soluble fibre may also be recommended by your doctor or nurse. This may help your stool become more formed.