

## A patient guide to a **Healthy Bowel**

### What is a normal healthy bowel?

**It is normal to empty your bowel**....between three times a day and three times a week without having to strain. You should not experience any pain or bleeding.

**When your bowel is full**.... You should have a sensation to empty your bowel. The bowel will contract and stool should be easily passed out.

**In order to maintain continence**.... A group of muscles called 'Pelvic Floor Muscles' should be supporting and controlling your bowel outlet. If you are able to activate your pelvic floor muscles correctly you should be able to hold on to soft formed faeces until you reach the toilet.

### What can go wrong with your bowel?

**Constipation**....This is passing faeces less than three times per week, or going less often than you would normally. Some people with constipation may have to strain or experience pain when opening their bowels.

**Faecal Incontinence**...This is a loss of control over your bowel. It may be a loss of wind, liquid or solid faeces from the back passage. It may happen with no sensation of the need to use the toilet or there may be an urgent feeling of the need to have a bowel movement

### Some factors that may cause bowel problems include:

Too much or too little fibre in your diet / Poor fluid intake / Poor bowel habits / Shift work / Immobility / Change of diet or environment, e.g. holiday / Ignoring the need to open your bowels

### Life style changes that can improve or even cure most bowel problems include:

**Drink about 6-8 mugs (1500-2000mls) of fluid each day**....If you do not drink enough, stools can become dry and this can lead to constipation.

**Caffeine**...Caffeine may stimulate the bowel so avoiding drinks such as tea, coffee and coke will help to reduce some bowel urgency. Caffeine can be used to stimulate the bowel if it is sluggish.

**Drink alcohol in moderation**... As alcohol often makes bowel urgency and loose stool more troublesome

**Stop smoking**... Nicotine can irritate the bowel.

**Diet and exercise**.... Eat a well-balanced diet including wholemeal bread and cereals, fruit, vegetables and pulses. Regular exercise is good for your general health and helps prevent constipation.

**Avoid straining when having a bowel movement**...As this can stretch the pelvic floor area and weaken these important muscles that help to control your bladder and bowel.

**Do not ignore the signal to have your bowels opened**... This can lead to constipation.

**Avoid taking laxatives**.... Unless they have been recommended or prescribed as part of your treatment program

**Regular pelvic floor muscle exercises** – Your health care professional will assess your pelvic floor muscle strength and provide you with a tailor made exercise programme.

## Using a bowel and food diary to help in your bowel management

It is possible that some foods or drinks can act as a trigger or stimulant to your bowel. So comparing your bowel, food and fluid diary may help you and your Health Care Professional identify any 'Trigger Foods' that affect your bowel activity.

## Having a routine in the morning can help promote a regular bowel habit.

Bowels like routine and many people do have a strong urge to open their bowels approximately 15 to 30 minutes after eating a meal. However, the urge to open our bowels is strongest in the morning therefore having a good morning routine promotes a regular bowel habit.

## A good routine in the morning would include starting the day as follows:

**Take a hot drink** - as soon as you wake up, such as hot water, tea or coffee. This will help 'Kick Start' the gastro colic reflex which is needed to stimulate the bowels to empty.

**Always eat breakfast** – This will help move the stool in your bowel, help fill your back passage and increase the urge to have your bowels open.

**Get washed and dressed-** Moving about will help stimulate your bowel and this will in turn increase the urge for you to have your bowels open.

**Sit on the toilet** – to try to empty your bowels. Avoid straining and make sure you sit correctly.

## Correct Toilet Posture:

To empty your bowels effectively it is important to ensure you sit on the toilet correctly this includes the following:

**Raise your knees** – to ensure your back passage is in the correct position you will need to raise your knees above your hips. You may need to use a foot stool.

**Ensure your feet are flat** – and firmly placed on the floor or foot stool.

**Lean slightly forward** - and place your elbows on your thighs.

