Fecal Incontinence/Constipation FAQs

What are fecal incontinence and constipation?
Fecal incontinence is the inability to control your bowels—for instance, not being able to “hold it” until you get to the toilet, or perhaps leaking stool unexpectedly while passing gas. It’s not uncommon. More than five million people in the U.S. have fecal incontinence. Constipation, on the other hand, is difficulty emptying your bowels. Bowel movements can be infrequent or hard to pass.

What causes fecal incontinence?
There are many causes. For instance, it could be caused by dietary habits. It could be the result of surgery or perhaps nerve related. Aging, pregnancy, childbirth, a longstanding case of diabetes—even radiation—can cause fecal incontinence.

What causes constipation?
Again, there are many causes. Not enough fiber in the diet is one cause. Dehydration is another. A lack of exercise, some medications, nerve injury, spinal cord injury, pregnancy, hormone deficiencies—all can lead to constipation.

How is fecal incontinence treated?
There are several options. Dietary changes, medications, physical therapy (bowel training), and surgery can all help control the symptoms of fecal incontinence. Medical management (non-surgical) is always the first line of therapy. If those measures fail, then surgical treatment is considered.

What about treatments for constipation?
It’s important to eat enough fiber and drink enough fluids. A diet with enough fiber helps the body form soft, bulky stool. Most constipation can be managed with medical therapy and a good bowel regimen. As with incontinence, surgery is the last option for treating constipation.

How can I prevent fecal incontinence?
An improved diet can help. Fecal incontinence related to aging and muscle deterioration can be prevented by doing Kegel’s exercises, which are exercises for the pelvic muscles. Otherwise, a specific injury or condition causing fecal incontinence needs to be treated on an individual basis.

What can be done to prevent constipation?
Most instances of constipation can be prevented with good dietary habits and a good bowel regimen.

Contact Us
UT Southwestern pelvic floor specialists can help with fecal incontinence and constipation. To schedule an evaluation, call 214-645-8300.