

# **A Thai Approach to Constipation**

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## **Definition, Symptoms and Causes**

Constipation, or a lack of proper frequency in bowel movements, can be frustrating on many levels. Though it is more commonly associated with the aging community, most people have been constipated at one point or another due to situational stress or an unhealthy diet. It has also become one of the more frequent side effects of both anti-depressant and chemotherapeutic therapies here in the west.

Some of the symptoms of constipation include, but are not limited to, difficulty starting and/or finishing bowel movements, infrequent passage of stool, passing hard stool after prolonged straining, cramping, abdominal pain, excessive gas or the inability to pass gas, and in the cases of obstruction, nausea and vomiting, distended abdomen, headaches and loss of appetite.

Aside from the physical discomfort it creates, identifying causative factors can vary from person to person. Many times, constipation is a result of improper nutrition. For example, eating foods that are highly refined or high in animal fat content can be to blame. Insufficient intake of fiber is another known trigger. Other causes include, but are not limited to, medications such as antidepressants, chemotherapeutics, antispasmodics, iron supplementation tablets, overuse of antacids, and painkillers. Many people find that traveling causes lackluster bowel functioning as well. Unfortunately, some of the more insidious, and thankfully rarer causes for constipation include blockages resulting from hernias, intestinal tumors, damage to nerves within the intestine, gallstones, and/or thyroid or metabolic disorders.

Though it is always necessary to identify the cause of constipation, especially to root out some of the more serious conditions or blockages, Traditional Thai Massage can be an effective means of alleviating some of its discomfort and help the client to stimulate his/her own healthy flow of digestive energy and proper intestinal peristalsis.

## **Treating Constipation – Western Style**

Just as causes for constipation vary in severity, so do treatments. In most cases simple lifestyle and dietary changes will suffice. When conditions are more severe, additional regimens of medications, enemas, colonic irrigation and/or surgery may be necessary.

In cases where improper nutrition is the cause, opposite intake of nutrients is often the remedy. By increasing one's intake of water and natural liquids, fiber, fresh fruits and whole grains and at the same time decreasing the intake of highly processed foods, dairy and animal fat, a person's digestive tract can return to an effective homeostasis. In Thailand, some of the more commonly ingested foods and herbs that treat constipation include galangal, ginger, lemongrass, basil, hot herbs such as black pepper, cayenne, cloves, red and green curries, etc. Papaya, banana and tamarind are also added to the diet to stimulate digestion and an increase in exercise can also prove helpful. Included in this article

you will find a recipe for what has essentially become the “chicken soup” of Thailand. It can be a helpful remedy for constipation because of its inclusion of galangal (or ginger) and other hot tasting herbs. Also included are directions to make *Som Tam*, another therapeutic dish that features both papaya and green chili, two effective supplements for treating constipation.

When dietary treatment proves ineffective, allopathic doctors often recommend an over-the-counter laxative or regimen of enemas to stimulate peristalsis. Unfortunately, this type of treatment can carry contraindications for those taking certain medicines since it impedes the body’s natural absorption of supplements, minerals and nutrients. These therapies also carry addictive concerns when used too often, sometimes leaving the body reliant upon them to maintain what should be a natural bodily function.

For those who are constipated because of an obstructive mass, hernia, nerve damage, etc., surgery to remove the tumor and/or correct the condition may be required. In these cases, Traditional Thai Massage is not the best course of treatment.

### **How Thai Massage Can Help**

When a person is experiencing discomfort as a result of mild to moderate constipation (where obstructions, hernias, etc. are not the cause), Traditional Thai Massage can be a highly effective means of treatment. According to Thai belief, all of the energetic meridians in the body, or *sen*, originate at the navel. Because of this, a significant amount of emphasis is placed upon manipulating and removing energetic imbalances in the abdomen. A common byproduct of this is a regular gastrointestinal response.

Aside from abdominal manipulation, many of the yoga stretches performed during Traditional Thai massage can have a great impact on the constipated client. The use of herbal compresses can stimulate the body’s digestive responsibility as well, especially when using hot herbs such as ginger, galangal and/or turmeric.

Below is the traditional series for abdominal manipulation as is taught at the Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai.

1. The practitioner applies moving pressure to the abdomen in the direction of the colon (clockwise).

Within any traditional Thai massage sequence, a practitioner will circle the abdomen once or twice, applying pressure at the points shown below. However, when treating issues of digestive stagnation it is therapeutic to increase the number of repetitions. It is also important to note that the abdomen may be a sensitive area for the client both emotionally and physically and careful consideration must be taken into account in order to ensure comfort during treatment. Each person will respond differently to levels of pressure.

2. Thumb pressure (*jap sen*) is applied on the eight points surrounding the navel. This pressure is often applied to two points at the same time, beginning with those directly lateral to the navel. Then the top left and bottom right points are addressed, followed by those above and below the navel. The circle is then completed with *jap sen* to the upper right and bottom left points. By completing the treatment in this sequence, the practitioner is always working in a clockwise fashion, complementing the body’s natural digestive flow.

The above step will not only treat constipation, but since all of the traditional Thai *sen* originate at the navel, it is not unusual for a client to experience a subsidence in symptoms associated with unrelated energetic imbalances.

### 3. Palm pressure on abdomen

The Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai offers a variety of different techniques that can be employed when administering step 3 on a client. For those that are experiencing minor symptoms of constipation, a combination of gentle palm pressure (on eight points illustrated above in step 1) and cued exhalations of breath is quite effective.

For clients presenting with more advanced constipation, alternate and/or adjuvant therapies might be suggested. For example, a deeper application of pressure on the aforementioned eight points followed by alternating pressure on either side of the navel can be deeply therapeutic. This latter technique is administered by placing both palms lateral to the navel and then applying pressure alternately in combination with cued exhalations of breath.

### Thai Yoga Stretches

In addition to abdominal manipulation, the following stretches may be useful in treating constipation.

1. Pulling the client's knees into his/her chest while in the supine position performs the first yoga stretch that is often employed during traditional Thai massage. The practitioner will then add additional pressure by leaning his/her own body weight into the stretch. The benefits of this stretch are in its ability to relieve gaseous accumulations in the intestines. This is largely due to the fact that pressure is applied directly to the ascending, transverse and descending colon. The digestive system responds in a similar fashion to that of a person "squeezing a tube of toothpaste." The pressure alone inspires the bowels to loosen and move more efficiently.
2. When mobilizing the joints during traditional Thai massage, practitioners often stretch the hip flexors by alternately bringing a client's knee to his/her chest. This can also be an effective treatment for constipation as the stretch applies pressure to the ascending and descending colon, eliminates gas and inspires movement within the intestines.\*Though traditional massage asks that a woman's left side be treated first, a more western approach, and one that I find most therapeutic, would suggest that in cases with constipation, the right side be treated first regardless of gender. This is because of the natural clockwise movement of energy and substance through the intestines.
3. Part of the traditional seated posture sequence, as taught by the Old Medicine Hospital, places the client into a forward bend with legs fully extended. From this posture, the practitioner then applies pressure from behind; the result increases flexibility in the entire back body (i.e. hamstrings, erector spinae, etc.). The byproduct of this stretch, however, can be seen in its additional pressure to the internal organs of the lower abdomen. The result is similar to that of both aforementioned steps.

For clients who have difficulty sitting upright with legs outstretched, the same stretch can be approached in the passive manner seen pictured above. In this instance, the practitioner places the client's extended legs against his own and using a double grip technique and proper body mechanics, passively lifts the client into the stretch.

## **Dietary Supplementation**

In Thailand, Thai massage is used to address energetic manifestations of illness. Herbs and dietary supplementations and/or restrictions are also important treatments. When addressing issues of constipation, the following recipes are tried and trusted methods for relief.

### **Ginger Tea**

Ginger is a widely used ingredient when treating issues of gastrointestinal distress, constipation, nausea, flatulence, etc. Below is a traditional recipe for tea that is quite soothing to both belly and spirit.

#### **Ingredients**

3 cups water  
3-5 inches fresh ginger root (washed) sugar (to taste)

1. Remove barky parts of 3-5 inches of fresh ginger root. Crush with mortar and pestle. (Keep in mind that the potency of the taste and the intensity of treatment depends upon the amount of ginger used in this recipe. It is always advisable to seek the help of a doctor or naturopathic practitioner prior to any self-medicating.)
2. Place ginger with water in pot and boil.
3. Allow mixture to simmer for 8-9 minutes.
4. Strain mixture into mug.
5. Stir and serve with sugar (or substitute honey, stevia, etc.) to taste.

### **Tom Yum Goong**

Tom Yum can be made with chicken (*kai*), shrimp (*koong*) or for a vegetarian option, substituting vegetable stock and tofu for the base and protein portion of the dish will maintain its efficacy and taste.

1/3 lb shelled shrimp (for more authentic Thai preparation, leave tails on) Approx. 20 straw mushrooms (halved)  
2 cups stock (chicken or vegetable)  
1/2 lemongrass stalk (cut into 1 inch pieces)

4 kaffir lime leaves  
4 slices galangal or ginger (remove barky portions) 10 small green chilies (halved lengthwise)  
2 Tbsp. fish sauce  
5 sliced shallots  
2 Tbsp. lime juice  
1/2 tsp. sugar  
1/2 tsp. chili paste  
1/2 tsp. soy bean oil  
cilantro (as desired)

1. De-vein the shrimp. Rinse, drain and set aside.
2. In a large pot, combine chicken or vegetable stock, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, galangal or ginger, chilies and shallots. Bring to a boil.
3. Reduce the heat to medium and add mushrooms, fish sauce, lime juice, sugar, chili paste, and soy bean oil and cook for 3-4 minutes.
4. Add shrimp and continue to cook until shrimp changes color (approximately 2-3 minutes)
5. Remove from heat and serve with sprinkle of cilantro.

### **Som Tam – Green Papaya Salad**

3 cloves of garlic

2-4 green chilies

1/2 Tbsp. sugar

4-5 green beans

2 small tomatoes (quartered) 2 cups grated green papaya 2 Tbsp. lime juice

1 Tbsp. fish sauce (or salt) 2 Tbsp. peanuts (optional)

1. Shred papaya and set aside.
2. Combine garlic and chilies in a pestle. Pound until thoroughly mixed.
3. Add sugar and green beans. Pound again.
4. Gently mash tomatoes into mixture.
5. Add papaya. Pound again.
6. Add lime juice, fish sauce and peanuts. Pound all ingredients together for 1-2 minutes.
7. Serve with a ginger based tea for extra digestive support.

### **Spiritual Practice**

According to Thai tradition, any imbalance that presents in body and/or energy is bound to express itself within the spirit (*citta*) as well. It is because of this that both client and practitioner must cultivate positive intentions during all treatments whether they be physical, energetic or spiritual. By doing so, the natural healing response becomes inspired in all levels of life; body, energy and spirit.

### **Sources**

“Constipation in Adults: Constipation Symptoms.” [www.emedicinehealth.com](http://www.emedicinehealth.com)

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