

Constipation

Constipation is the infrequent or difficult passing of hard dry stool. It may cause pain and discomfort. This handout explains some of the causes of constipation. It also shares self-care and treatment options.

Causes

Pain Medicine

Many of the medicines used for pain control slow the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. This may cause constipation. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if your medicine puts you at risk. It is important to control pain, so take pain medicines as needed. When pain is controlled, you move better, breathe more deeply and rest better. However, you may want to begin stool softeners or laxatives to prevent constipation. Stool softeners hold water in the stool to keep it soft. Laxatives stimulate movement through the GI tract.

A medicine that has both a laxative and a softener is Senokot-S[®]. You do not need a prescription for this. It is available in most grocery and drug stores. You can safely take up to 8 Senokot-S[®] pills per day. Start with 2 doses per day or as directed by your doctor or nurse. Gradually increase the dosage until you have soft-formed stools on a regular basis. However, **do not** take more than 500 milligrams of docusate sodium (stool softener) per day.

Decreased Activity

Many people feel tired and do not move around as much during chemotherapy (chemo) treatment. This slows down the GI tract. Be as active as you can.

Poor Oral intake

If chemo causes nausea or vomiting you may not be able to eat and drink as much as normal. This can cause constipation. Ask your nurse for tips to manage nausea and vomiting.

Nutrition and Constipation

Regardless of the cause of constipation, these tips may help:

- Drink 8 to 12 glasses (8-ounces each) of fluids every day. Getting enough liquid helps keep stools soft. If your urine is dark, you are not drinking enough.
- Eat small frequent meals.
- Eat high-fiber foods. Examples are peas and beans, seeds, whole grains, and high-fiber fruits and vegetables or those with thick peels/skins.

- Drink warm or hot fluid (including soups). This stimulates the GI tract.
- Add fiber to your diet every day unless you have been told to limit fiber. Examples of high fiber-foods are:
 - High-fiber cereals
 - Fresh vegetables
 - Fresh fruits with skins; especially prunes
 - Whole grains
 - Legumes (beans) – very high in fiber
 - Read labels for grams of fiber, especially non-soluble fiber. Non-soluble fiber helps keep bowel movements (BMs) soft.

Adult Fiber Needs

	Age 50 or younger	Age 51 or older
Men	38 grams	30 grams
Women	25 grams	21 grams

Institute of Medicine, 2012

- Limit your intake of foods that cause you gas or bloating. This may help your comfort. Examples are fizzy drinks and cabbage.

Self-Care

- Keep track of your BMs. Do not wait to take action about constipation.
- Fiber supplements: It may be difficult to meet daily fiber needs with food alone. For instance, one apple with skin has 4 grams of fiber, bran flakes have 5 grams. Ask about fiber supplements if you cannot eat enough fiber.
- Adding medicinal fiber too fast to your diet may cause cramping and bloating. To prevent this, gradually add fiber in 1 teaspoon increments every five days.
- Walk as much as you can. The movement of walking stimulates the GI tract.
- Do not ignore the urge to have a BM. Holding stool results in harder and larger stool that is more difficult to pass.
- Find out which foods worsen your constipation. Some people find cheese constipating for instance. Avoid those foods.
- If you have fewer than 3 BMs per week, drink 4 ounces of prune juice at room temperature. Then immediately drink a hot liquid. If you do not have a bowel movement by bedtime, take 2 tablespoons or 2 caplets of milk of magnesia with 8 ounces of water. If you do not have a BM after breakfast the next day, repeat the dose of milk of magnesia. If you have kidney problems, ask your doctor before you take milk of magnesia.
- Do not use enemas and suppositories if your platelet or white blood cell counts are low or if

you are taking blood thinners.

Report to Your Doctor

- If you go 3 days without a BM
- If you had constipation for several days followed by diarrhea. This might indicate an impaction (severe constipation) which needs attention.
- If there is blood in the stool
- If you have cramps or vomiting that does not stop

Resources

You may benefit from a visit with a dietitian. Ask for a referral.

Ask for the handouts “Keeping Nausea Under Control,” “Nausea and Vomiting: Tips for Coping,” “High Fiber Diet” and “Medicinal Bulk-Forming Fiber.”

Visit the American Cancer Society:

<http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatmentsandsideeffects/physicalsideeffects/dealingwithsymptomsathome/caring-for-the-patient-with-cancer-at-home-constipation>

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