

Constipation

Constipation is when you have hard, dry stool that is difficult to pass. Bowel movements may also be less frequent. Symptoms may include pain, discomfort, gas, nausea and a decrease in appetite. This handout explains some of the causes of constipation and how to manage it.

Causes

Medicines

Pain medicines and some anti-nausea medicines can often cause constipation. They slow the normal movement of stool in the colon. Because stool stays in the colon longer, more water is removed from the stool. This can cause hard, dry stools and painful bowel movements.

In order to manage your pain and nausea, it is important to take medicines as needed. It is a good idea to take a stool softener and/or laxative with these medicines to help prevent constipation. Stool softeners hold water in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract to keep stool soft. Laxatives stimulate movement through the GI tract.

Ask your health care team if your medicines may cause constipation.

Decreased Activity

Many people feel tired and are less active during chemotherapy (chemo) treatment. Less physical activity slows down the GI tract. Physical activity such as walking, can help stimulate the bowels and bring on a bowel movement. Be as active as you can.

Decreased Appetite and Fluid Intake

Chemo can cause nausea, vomiting and lack of appetite. You may not be able to eat and drink as much as you normally do. A decrease in appetite and fluid intake can cause constipation. Ask your health care team for tips to improve your appetite and how to manage nausea and vomiting.

Treatment

- Take medicines to help promote a bowel movement and soften stool. A medicine that contains both a laxative and a stool softener is senna with docusate (Senokot-S[®]). You can safely take up to 8 Senokot-S pills per day. Start with 1 pill, 2 times a day (1 in the morning and 1 at bedtime) or as directed by your health care team. If this does not bring on a bowel movement, slowly increase the dosage 1 pill at a time until you have soft-formed stools every day or every other day. **Do not** take more than 8 tablets per day.
- Miralax[®] is another laxative that can help prevent constipation. Miralax draws water into the colon and helps soften stool, making it easier to pass. Use by mixing 17 grams of Miralax in 8 ounces of water or other liquid and drink it every day. You may take Miralax once per day

in addition to Senokot-S if needed. If this does not help bring on a bowel movement, contact your nurse.

The products mentioned above can be purchased without a prescription at most drug and grocery stores. Many store brand stimulant laxative/stool softeners work as well as brand names and often cost less.

Nutrition and Constipation

These general nutrition tips may help improve appetite and fluid intake.

- Eat small, frequent meals every 2 to 3 hours.
- Add high-fiber foods to your diet every day, unless you have been told to limit fiber.
Examples:
 - High-fiber cereals
 - Fresh vegetables
 - Fresh fruits with skins, especially prunes
 - Whole grains (quinoa, oatmeal, brown rice, whole grain breads)
 - Legumes (beans)
- Drink 8 to 10 cups (64 to 80 ounces) of fluids every day. Drinking enough liquid helps soften stools. If your urine is dark, you are not drinking enough.
- Drink warm or hot fluids (including soups). This stimulates the GI tract. Drinking **warm** prune juice before a meal and a **hot** beverage after your meal can help bring on a bowel movement.
- Try taking medicinal fiber like Metamucil® or Citrucel®. This type of fiber helps soften stool. Mix 1 tablespoon (6.8 grams) of the fiber in 8 ounces of water. Next, drink 8 more ounces of fluid **right away**. Taking fiber without drinking enough fluid can make constipation worse. Psyllium is the generic name for Metamucil, and methylcellulose is the generic name for Citrucel.
 - **Do not** substitute:
 - Fiber pills for powdered fiber or wafers. These products can make constipation worse.
 - Soluble fiber (such as Benefiber® or Fiber Choice®) for a bulk-forming fiber. Soluble fiber does not have the same effect as bulk-forming fiber. Soluble fiber feeds the normal bacteria in the colon and helps move stool down the GI tract. The inside of an apple and other fruits and vegetables are examples of soluble fiber.

Self-Care Tips

- Keep track of your bowel movements.
- Treat constipation **right away** when symptoms first appear. **Do not wait** to take action.
- **Do not** ignore the urge to have a bowel movement. Holding stool results in harder and larger stool that is difficult to pass.
- Find out which foods cause you constipation and avoid those foods.
- **Do not** use enemas and suppositories if your platelet or white blood cell counts are low or if you take blood thinners.

When to Call Your Doctor



Report any of these symptoms to your doctor:

- You go 3 days without a bowel movement.
- You have constipation for several days followed by diarrhea. This might indicate an impaction (severe constipation) which needs attention.
- You see blood in your stool.
- You have cramps or vomiting that does not stop.

Resources

If you would like to meet with a dietitian, contact your care team for a consult, send a message through MyChart or call the Department of Clinical Nutrition at 713-563-5167.

Bowel Management Class

Attend this free class. You will learn how to promote good bowel health and how to prevent and manage constipation and diarrhea. For information, visit The Learning Center for a class schedule.

American Cancer Society

<https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/constipation.html>

American Institute for Cancer Research

<https://blog.aicr.org/2018/03/06/for-colorectal-cancer-month-learn-how-to-keep-your-gut-healthy-in-treatment-says-oncology-expert/>