

Constipation Control When Taking Pain Medicine

Pain medicines and some chemotherapy (chemo) and anti-nausea medicines commonly cause severe constipation. They affect the digestive system by:

- Slowing down the movement of stool in the large bowel (colon)
- Removing more water than normal from the colon

Preventing Constipation

Before taking opioid pain medicine or beginning chemo, it is a good idea to clean out your colon by taking laxatives of your choice. If you have not had a bowel movement for 3 to 5 days, ask your nurse for advice on how to pass a large amount of stool from your colon.

After beginning treatment, you can prevent constipation by regularly taking stimulant laxatives and stool softeners. These will counteract the effects of the constipating medicines. For example, senna (a stimulant laxative), helps move stool down in the colon and docusate sodium (a stool softener) helps soften the stool by keeping water in the stool. Brand names of combination stimulant laxatives and stool softeners are Senna-S[®] and Senokot-S[®]. The ‘S’ is the stool softener of these products. Follow the guidelines below to take the medicine.

- You can safely take up to 8 Senokot-S pills or Senna-S in generic form per day. Start at the dose advised by your care team. Gradually increase the dose until you have soft-formed stools on a regular basis. **Do not** take more than 500 mg of docusate sodium per day if you are taking the stool softener (docusate sodium) separate from Senokot-S or Senna-S generic.
- 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. Contact your nurse if this does not help bring on a bowel movement.
- The products mentioned above are available without a prescription at drug and grocery stores. Many store brand stimulant laxatives and stool softeners work as well as brand names and cost less.

If the doctor increases your pain medicine, gradually increase your intake of stool softener and stimulant laxative to keep your stool soft and formed.

Treating Unrelieved Constipation

To **treat** unrelieved constipation, you need to empty the formed stool in your colon. If you are taking constipating medicine and have not had a bowel movement for 3 or more days, clean out your colon as directed by your care team. You may also try the suggestions in this handout.

Milk of Magnesia

Milk of magnesia can help you have a bowel movement. Take 2 tablespoons or 2 caplets of milk of magnesia with 8 ounces of water every 6 hours or until you have a bowel movement. If you do not have a bowel movement after breakfast the next day, repeat the dose of milk of magnesia. **Do not** take milk of magnesia if you have kidney problems.

Enema

If you become constipated while taking pain medicine, your care team may prescribe a milk and molasses enema. Because this enema has a small amount of liquid, most patients have no problem using this. The enema will help break up the stool and move it down the colon so that you can easily pass it.



Do not use an enema if:

- You are on chemo and your blood counts are low. Bleeding may occur. If you are taking chemo and need relief from constipation, ask your nurse or doctor for more information.
- You have symptoms of a bowel obstruction. This means that something could be blocking your small intestine or colon. If you have symptoms of a bowel obstruction, **do not** take a laxative without advice from your doctor or nurse. Symptoms of a bowel obstruction include:
 - Loss of appetite
 - Vomiting
 - Abdominal pain and/or swelling
 - No bowel movement for several days along with one or more of the other symptoms

Report any of these symptoms to your doctor or nurse.

Relistor®

If you are on opioids, and taking 8 Senna-S pills and Miralax each day and are unable to have a bowel movement, ask your doctor about Relistor. This is a prescription medicine that treats constipation caused by opioid pain medicine.

Frequency of Bowel Movements

After you clean out your colon, try to determine how often you should have a bowel movement. As described below, your frequency of bowel movements depends on how much food you take in.

Everyone's bowels move differently, but in general:

- If you eat your regular amount of food per day, expect to have a bowel movement every day.
- If you eat one-half your regular amount of food, expect to have a bowel movement every other day.
- If you eat one-third your regular amount of food, expect to have a bowel movement every third day.
- If you do not have a bowel movement by 4 p.m. on the day you expect, take 4 ounces of prune juice followed by 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 every 6 hours or until

you have a bowel movement. If you do not have a bowel movement after breakfast the next day, repeat the dose of milk of magnesia. **Do not** take milk of magnesia if you have kidney problems.

- If you have to keep taking milk of magnesia, your maintenance bowel program is not strong enough. You may need to increase your dose of Senna-S. Ask your nurse or doctor for instructions.

Promoting Regular Bowel Movements

- Drink at least 64 ounces (about 2 quarts or 2 liters) of non-alcoholic fluid each day. Half of the fluids you take in each day should be caffeine free.
 - Take medicines as directed by your doctor or nurse. Follow their advice on preventive measures when taking medicines that cause constipation.
 - Eat 1 cup of General Mills Fiber One® Cereal (the noodle type) each day. One cup provides 28 grams of fiber and may be substituted for medicinal fiber (described below).
- or**
- Take fiber as a medicine to control stool consistency and frequency. Once a day, take 6.8 grams of psyllium (brand name Metamucil®) or methylcellulose (brand name Citrucel®) mixed in 8 ounces of water. Then drink 8 more ounces of fluid right away.
 - It is **very important to have bowel movements regularly** while you are on chemo to help keep your stools soft and formed.