

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, some chemotherapy (chemo) 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.

You should take a stool softener and/or laxative while taking medicines that can cause constipation. Stool softeners hold water in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract to keep stool soft. Laxatives stimulate movement through the GI tract.

Ask your medical team if your medicines may cause constipation.

Decreased Activity

Many people feel tired and are less active during chemo treatment. Less activity and movement slow 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 care team for tips to improve your appetite and how to manage nausea and vomiting.

Treatment

Take medicines to help promote bowel movements and soften stool.

- Docusate with sennosides (Senokot-S[®]) is a medicine that contains both a laxative and a stool softener. You can safely take up to 8 Senokot-S pills per day. To start, take 1 pill (docusate 50 mg and sennosides 8.6 mg) 2 times a day (1 pill in the morning and 1 at bedtime) or as directed by your medical 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.
- Polyethylene glycol (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 1 capful (17 grams) of Miralax powder in 8 ounces of water or other liquid and drink

it every day. You may take Miralax once a day in addition to taking Senokot-S if needed. If this does not help bring on a bowel movement, contact your medical team.

The products mentioned above can be purchased without a prescription at most drug and grocery stores. Many store brand stimulant laxative and 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 (wash first)
 - Fresh fruits with skins (wash first)
 - Prunes and/or prune juice
 - 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 psyllium (Metamucil®) or methylcellulose (Citrucel®). This type of fiber helps soften stool. Mix 1 to 2 teaspoons (5.8 to 11.6 grams) of the fiber in 8 ounces or more of water. Mix well and drink it **right away**. Taking fiber without drinking enough fluid can make constipation worse.

Do not substitute fiber pills for powdered fiber or wafers. These products can make constipation worse.

Self-Care Tips

- Keep track of your bowel movements.
- Treat constipation **right away** when symptoms first appear. **Do not wait** to take a laxative.
- **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 care team:

- 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.

American Cancer Society

<https://bit.ly/Constipation-ACS>

American Institute for Cancer Research

<https://bit.ly/AICR-GutHealth>