

Patient Care Services  
300 Pasteur Drive  
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## Constipation in Cancer Care Symptom Management

### **What You Should Know**

Constipation is a common problem for cancer patients. Over half of patients getting cancer treatment will experience constipation. Constipation is when bowel movements are delayed. The feces (stool) can be dry and hard. Constipation can cause bloating, nausea, stomach pain, and painful bowel movements.

### **Causes**

Constipation may be caused by many things such as medical treatment, medication, diet and nutrition, and stress. Examples include:

#### Medical Treatments

- Surgery.
- Chemotherapy.
- Radiation Therapy.

#### Medications

- Chemotherapy Agents.
- Pain Medications (such as Opioids).
- Nausea Medications (such as ondansetron).

#### Diet and Nutrition

- Low Fiber Diets.
- Decreased Water Intake.

#### Lifestyle

- Inactivity or lack of exercise.

### **Signs & Symptoms**

- Stomach pain.
- Pressure in rectum.

- Nausea and/or vomiting.
- Bloating or stomach feels hard to touch.
  - Unable to pass gas.
  - Infrequent bowel movements.
    - *There is no normal expectation of a schedule. No one knows your body better than you. Infrequent should be based on your own "normal" schedule of bowel movements.*
  - Hard, difficult to pass, bowel movements.
    - *Stool will often be small pellet or marble-like pieces.*

## **Prevention**

There are things you can do to help prevent constipation.

### Diet and Nutrition:

Drinking enough fluids is important to prevent constipation. Some fluid suggestions to include in your diet:

- Drink 8-10 glasses of fluid a day.
  - Avoid caffeine and alcoholic beverages.
- Drink a warm-to-hot decaffeinated drink about one half-hour before the usual time for a bowel movement.
- Drink prune juice 1-2 times a day.
- Smooth Move Tea.
  - Available in many grocery stores.
  - Drink one cup of this tea twice a day until you have a bowel movement.

Foods that are high in fiber and bulk can help prevent constipation. Foods to include in your diet:

- Raw fruits and vegetables.
- Beans & legumes, nuts and seeds.
- Whole grain breads and cereals.
- Bran.
  - Add bran to your diet gradually starting with 2 teaspoons a day, increasing to a maximum of 4 to 6 teaspoons a day. Too rapid an increase in bran may cause diarrhea.
  - Some bran cereals have more fiber than others; check the label on the box.
- When increasing fiber in your diet be sure to drink lots of fluids (8 to 10 glasses).

Several types of foods can contribute to constipation. Foods to **avoid** in your diet include:

- Refined or processed grains and cereals.
- Low fiber bread (white or brown colored white bread).
- Cheese or milk products in large quantities.

### Lifestyle:

### Increase activity

- *Exercise daily such as a half-hour walk, especially after meals.*
- Aromatherapy and Massage (Optional Holistic Treatments)
  - *Black Pepper, Cinnamon, Grapefruit, and Marjoram oils have shown to increase digestive function.*

### Medications to prevent constipation or to soften hard stools:

Take docusate (Colace) stool softener 100mg or 250mg twice daily.

- If your stools are still hard after taking Colace for 2 days:
  - Continue the Colace.
  - Add Miralax once daily.

### **Treatment**

Sometimes constipation cannot be relieved by diet or lifestyle changes. Do not be afraid or embarrassed to call your doctor or nurse at any time. If left untreated, the constipation may get worse. Medications may need to be added to help get your bowel movements back to normal.

If you have **NOT** had a bowel movement in **3 or MORE days**:

- On the first day of constipation:
  - Take 2 tablets Senna 100mg twice a day.
  - Increase your fluid intake to 8-10 glasses of water a day.
- If you have not had a bowel movement on the **2nd day**:
  - Continue taking Senna twice a day.
  - Add 2 tablespoons of Milk of Magnesia twice a day.
- If you have not had a bowel movement on the 3rd day:
  - Continue taking 2 Senna and 2 tablespoons of Milk of Magnesia twice a day.
  - Call your doctor's office for further instructions.

**Once you have had a bowel movement, STOP the Senna and Milk of Magnesia.**

- To help prevent constipation from occurring again, start Colace twice daily and Miralax once daily, as described above.

Your doctor may recommend other over-the-counter medications to prevent or treat constipation, such as:

- Psyllium (Metamucil ®)
- Senna (Senokot®)
- Bisacodyl (Dulcolax®)
- Docusate sodium (Colace®)
- Magnesium citrate
- Magnesium hydroxide (Milk of Magnesia®)
- Lactulose (Chronulac®)

***\*Because of an additional risk of infection for patients undergoing cancer treatment, rectal suppositories and enemas are to be avoided.***

### **Contact Your Provider If you have:**

- Fever (temperature above 38 C or 100.4 F)

- Pain in your stomach.
- You are unable to pass gas.
- Nausea and/or vomiting along with your constipation.
- If you have not had a bowel movement in three days despite following the recommendations of your doctor or health care professional.
- If your stomach looks swollen and/or feels hard to the touch.
- If you have new pain in the rectal area, hemorrhoids, or bleeding.

Last reviewed: 12/13

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