

Constipation and Chemotherapy

What Is Constipation?

Constipation is "abnormally delayed or infrequent passage of usually dry, hardened feces (stool or bowel movement)."

- Some people get constipated because they do not eat enough fruit and fiber, do not exercise or get enough activity, and/or do not drink enough fluids (most people should drink at least 8 glasses of water or other non-alcoholic drinks per day).
- Certain medical conditions and medications can cause constipation. For example, some chemotherapy drugs can result in constipation. Also, many pain medications cause constipation as a side effect.
- There are many things that patients can do to prevent or relieve constipation. Also, there are many medications your doctor can recommend for constipation.

Symptoms:

- Infrequent bowel movements. There is no "normal" schedule for bowel movements. Frequent or infrequent should be determined based on your own "normal" schedule. For example, if you normally move your bowels once per day, infrequent may be defined as every 2nd or 3rd day. This should be a consistent change, not a one-time occurrence.
- Hard, difficult to pass, bowel movements. Often, a person will pass small marble-like pieces of stool, without a satisfactory elimination.

Things You Can Do to Minimize Constipation:

- Eat foods high in fiber like fruits (pears, prunes), cereals, and vegetables.
- Drink two to three liters of non-alcoholic fluids (water, juices) each day; unless you are told otherwise by your doctor.
- Exercise twenty to thirty minutes most days of the week, as tolerated, and if okay with your doctor. A lot of patients find that walking for exercise is convenient and easy to do.
- If you have been prescribed a "bowel regimen," make sure you follow it exactly.

Drugs That May Be Prescribed by Your Doctor for Constipation:

Your doctor may recommend one or more of the following medications to prevent or treat constipation:

- Psyllium (Metamucil®)
- Senna (Senokot®)
- Bisacodyl (Dulcolax®)
- Docusate sodium (Colace®)
- Glycerin suppository
- Magnesium citrate
- Magnesium hydroxide (Milk of Magnesia®)
- Lactulose (Chronulac®)
- Sorbitol and sodium phosphate (Fleet's enema®)

When to Contact Your Doctor or Health Care Provider:

- Pain in your stomach.
- Fever.
- 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.

Note: We strongly encourage you to talk with your health care professional about your specific medical condition and treatments. The information contained in this website is meant to be helpful and educational, but is not a substitute for medical advice.