

## Constipation

Constipation is the infrequent or difficult passing of hard, dry stool. It may cause pain and discomfort. This handout explains some of the causes of constipation. It also shares self-care and treatment options.

### Pain Medicine

Many of the medicines used for pain control slow the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. This may cause constipation. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if your medicine puts you at risk. It is important to control pain, so take pain medicine as needed. When pain is controlled, you move better, breathe more deeply and rest better. However, you may want to begin stool softeners or laxatives to prevent constipation. Stool softeners hold water in the stool to keep it soft. Laxatives stimulate movement through the GI tract.

A medicine that has both a laxative and a softener is Senokot-S<sup>®</sup>. It is available in most grocery and drug stores without a prescription. You can safely take up to four Senokot-S pills twice per day. Start with two doses per day or as directed by your doctor or nurse. Gradually increase the dosage until you have soft-formed stools on a regular basis. However, do not take more than 500 milligrams of docusate sodium (stool softener) per day.

### Decreased Activity

Many people feel tired and do not move around as much during chemotherapy (chemo) treatment. This slows down the GI tract. Be as active as you can.

### Poor Oral Intake

If chemo causes nausea or vomiting, you may not be able to eat and drink as much as normal. This can cause constipation. Ask your nurse for tips to manage nausea and vomiting.

### Nutrition and Constipation

Regardless of the cause, these tips may help:

- Drink eight to 12, eight-ounce glasses of fluid every day. Getting enough liquid helps keep stools soft. If your urine is dark, you are not drinking enough.
- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Eat high-fiber foods, such as peas, beans, seeds, whole grains and fruits and vegetables with thick peels/skins, everyday unless you have been told to limit fiber intake. Read labels for grams of fiber, especially non-soluble fiber. Non-soluble fiber helps keep bowel movements (BMs) soft.
- Drink warm or hot fluid, including soups. This stimulates the GI tract.
- Limit your intake of foods that cause gas or bloating, such as fizzy drinks and cabbage. This may help your comfort.

## Adult Fiber Needs

	Age 50 or younger	Age 51 or older
Men	38 grams	30 grams
Women	25 grams	21 grams

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### Self-Care

The following self-care tips may help:

- Keep track of your BMs. Do not wait to take action about constipation.
- Ask about fiber supplements if you cannot eat enough fiber. It may be difficult to meet daily fiber needs with food alone. For instance, one apple with skin has four grams of fiber and bran flakes have five grams. Adding medicinal fiber too fast to your diet may cause cramping and bloating. To prevent this, gradually add fiber in one teaspoon increments every five days.
- Walk as much as you can. Walking stimulates the GI tract.
- Do not ignore the urge to have a BM. Holding stool results in harder and larger stool that is more difficult to pass.
- Find out what foods worsen your constipation. Avoid those foods. Some people find cheese constipating.
- If you have fewer than three BMs per week, drink four ounces of prune juice at room temperature then immediately drink a hot liquid. If you do not have a BM by bedtime, take two tablespoons or two caplets of milk of magnesia with eight ounces of water. If you do not have a BM after breakfast the next day, repeat the dose of milk of magnesia. If you have kidney problems, ask your doctor before you take milk of magnesia.
- Do not use enemas and suppositories, unless otherwise directed by your physician.

### Report to Your Doctor

Tell your doctor if:

- You go three days without a BM.
- You had constipation for several days followed by diarrhea. This might indicate an impaction (severe constipation), which needs attention.
- There is blood in the stool.
- You have cramps or vomiting that does not stop.

### Resources

You may benefit from a visit with a dietitian. Ask for a referral.

Visit the American Cancer Society at [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatmentsandsideeffects/physicalsideeffects/dealingwithsymptomsathome/caring-for-the-patient-with-cancer-at-home-constipation](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatmentsandsideeffects/physicalsideeffects/dealingwithsymptomsathome/caring-for-the-patient-with-cancer-at-home-constipation).