Managing bowel problems after cancer treatment

Information for cancer survivors

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- What bowel problems are
- What causes bowel problems
- What you can do to manage your bowel problems
- Where to get more information

Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: www.uhnpatienteducation.ca

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Author: Dr Doris Howell and ELLICSR Research Team
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Many patients receiving cancer treatment can have bowel problems. These problems can continue even after cancer treatment has ended.

What are bowel problems?

**Diarrhea**

Diarrhea is loose, watery or soft bowel movements that happen more than 3 or 4 times a day. You may also have stomach cramping and bloating.

Diarrhea can become serious. You might notice:

- changes to your eating patterns
- dehydration
- tiredness
- skin problems
- having less energy to be active

**Constipation**

You may be having constipation if you notice:

- Not having regular bowel movements for 2 or more days compared to your normal bowel routine. “Normal” bowel function means the usual pattern for you before starting treatment.
- Small, hard stools (bowel movements).
- Leakage of stools.
- Stomach ache or cramps, bloated belly, a feeling of fullness or discomfort.
- Passing excess gas or belching.
- Nausea or vomiting.
Remember:
There are other possible bowel problems that you may have such as gas, bloating, pain and problems with bowel control.

To learn more about these, please see pages 9 and 10 of this pamphlet.

What causes bowel problems and how long will this last?

Diarrhea

Phone your family doctor right away if your diarrhea continues for over 24 hours.

Diarrhea can be caused by many things:

- Chemotherapy
- Radiation to the stomach area
- Infection
- Not eating well (because you have less appetite, or not enough fibre in your diet)
- Certain medications

Diarrhea can last for as little as a few hours or for some it can become a long-term problem.
Constipation

There are many reasons why you may have constipation, such as:

- Chemotherapy
- Pain medication
- Anti-nausea medications
- Being less active
- Loss of appetite and not eating well
- Not drinking enough fluids

Constipation is annoying and uncomfortable. Some things can make constipation worse, such as not exercising or moving your body enough, or not having access to bathrooms when you need them.

**Remember:** These symptoms are compared to your normal bowel routine.

Call your family doctor right away if you have constipation along with vomiting and stomach pain.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can I do to manage my diarrhea?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eat small meals that are easy to digest</td>
<td>Eat 5 or 6 small meals each day, instead of 3 big meals. You can try the BRAT diet (<strong>Banana</strong>, <strong>Rice</strong>, <strong>Apple</strong>, and <strong>Tea</strong>) Examples:  - white toast  - eggs  - gelatin (Jell-O)  - oatmeal  - meats (such as chicken, fish, or turkey – broiled or baked, and cooked without the skin)  - crackers  - boiled potatoes  - noodles  - peanut butter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drink more liquids each day</td>
<td>Drinking more will not stop the diarrhea, but it will help replace fluids you are losing. Most people who have diarrhea need to drink <strong>8 to 12 cups of liquid every day</strong>. Examples:  - clear broth, such as chicken, vegetable or beef), gelatin, and Pedialyte®  - clear soda, such as ginger ale, cranberry or grape juice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Stay away from foods that can make diarrhea worse

Avoid these foods:

- **dairy products**: milk, cheese, and sour cream
- **drinks with caffeine**: coffee, tea, colas or eating chocolate
- **foods that cause gas**: broccoli and cabbage
- **foods that are high in fibre**: whole-wheat breads, granola and bran cereals
- spicy, greasy, or fried foods
- Remove skins, seeds and membranes from fruits and vegetables
- Do not use sugarless gum or other products made with artificial sweeteners like sorbitol

### What can I do to manage my constipation?

**Eat laxative foods**

Eat food high in fibre.

Examples:

- raw vegetables
- fruits with skin
- whole grain products
- popcorn
- dried fruits
- prunes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drink lots of liquids</th>
<th>Avoid these foods:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drink at least <strong>8 glasses of liquid a day.</strong></td>
<td><strong>dairy products:</strong> milk, cheese, and sour cream</td>
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<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td><strong>drinks with caffeine:</strong> coffee, tea, colas or eating chocolate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• milk</td>
<td><strong>foods that cause gas:</strong> broccoli and cabbage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• water</td>
<td><strong>foods that are high in fibre:</strong> whole-wheat breads, granola and bran cereals</td>
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<tr>
<td>• juice</td>
<td>• spicy, greasy, or fried foods</td>
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<tr>
<td>• any drink with no caffeine</td>
<td>• Remove skins, seeds and membranes from fruits and vegetables</td>
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<td>It may also help to drink these in the morning:</td>
<td>• Do not use sugarless gum or other products made with artificial sweeteners like <strong>sorbitol</strong></td>
</tr>
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<td>• prune juice</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
How do I talk to my doctor about my bowel problems?

Before you see your family doctor, take some time to think about how your bowel problems are affecting your life.

Ask yourself these 3 questions and write some notes below:

1. Are my bowel problems getting in the way of enjoying my life?
   If yes, how?
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

2. How bad are my bowel problems?
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

3. What is (are) the most stressful symptom(s) of my bowel problems?
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
Take this booklet with you when you go to see your doctor. Talk to your doctor about your answers. Let your doctor know how you feel. Only your doctor can help with some causes of bowel problems.

**What can I expect after seeing my doctor?**

Your doctor will talk to you about different options that may help.

You may need special tests to find out what is happening in your body. You may need a referral to a specialist. Your doctor may also change or prescribe new medicine to see if it helps.

**Where can I get more information?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Constipation, diarrhea</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization: American Cancer Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Website: <a href="http://www.cancer.org">www.cancer.org</a></td>
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<td>Organization: Canadian Cancer Encyclopedia</td>
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<td>Website: <a href="http://info.cancer.ca/cce-ecc">http://info.cancer.ca/cce-ecc</a></td>
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<td>Organization: Cancer Help UK</td>
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<td>Website: <a href="http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org">http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org</a></td>
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</table>
**Topic: Constipation, diarrhea**

Organization: Oncolink  
Website: [www.oncolink.org](http://www.oncolink.org)

**Topic: Stress Incontinence**

Organization: BUPA  
Website: [www.bupa.co.uk/individuals/health-information/directory/s/stress-incontinence](http://www.bupa.co.uk/individuals/health-information/directory/s/stress-incontinence)

**Topic: Bowel control problems**  
**Gas and gas pain**

Organization: Mayo Clinic  
Website: [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)

**Remember**

**For diarrhea:**

- Eat small meals
- Drink more liquids
- Avoid high fibre foods
- Avoid fatty or greasy foods

**For constipation:**

- Choose high fibre foods
- Drink lots of fluids
- Exercise regularly