

Constipation During Cancer Treatment

This pamphlet covers:

- What constipation is
- What causes it
- What you can do

Constipation can be caused by a medical condition, changes in your body, diet, being less active, as well as some medicines.

Constipation means you are having bowel movements (poo) less often than normal and your poo may be hard, dry and difficult to pass.

If constipation is caused by a medical condition or medicine, be sure to discuss bowel movements with your health care team. Not all the information in this resource may apply to you.



What are normal bowel habits?

Everyone has different bowel habits.

Some people have 2 to 3 bowel movements a day.

Others have a bowel movement every 2 to 3 days.

Constipation is common after an illness.

What can I do to help?

There are 2 general things you can do to relieve constipation:

1. Take medicine
2. Make changes to your lifestyle

Read about each option in this pamphlet.

Taking medicine

What types of medicine are there?

There are many different types of medicine for constipation. Check with your doctor before taking any laxatives. Some people may be more likely to have side effects.

Stimulants

Stimulants cause the muscles in the intestines to contract. They also pull water into the intestines to move the poo along.

Some examples are:

- senna (Senokot)
- bisacodyl (Dulcolax)

Osmotic Laxatives

These laxatives pull water into the intestines. This causes contractions that move the poo along.

Some examples are:

- PEG 3350 (Restoralax)
- magnesium hydroxide (Milk of Magnesia)
- lactulose

How should I take the medicine?

Follow your doctor's instructions for taking the medicine.

For routine medicine, take it at the same time each day. Other medicines are for taking only when you need it. Talk to a pharmacist about when and how to take this medicine.

Making changes to your lifestyle

What should I change?



1. Drink more liquids, if you can.

- Depending on our age, size and health, we need to drink 6 to 10 cups (1.5 to 2.5 litres) of liquids per day. Start slowly, and gradually increase the amount. Hot drinks can increase bowel activity.
- Liquids include juice, soups, milk, decaffeinated tea and water.
- Have small sips of liquids often if it is hard for you to drink a lot at one time.
- This will add water to your poo, which makes it softer and easier to pass.



2. Include more exercise or physical activity

- Physical activity and exercise will keep your bowels moving and help with passing poo.
- Before starting a new activity, be sure to check with your health care provider. You need to make sure it is safe for you. A referral can be made for you to see a physiotherapist or occupational therapist.



3. Slowly add fibre to your diet

- If your constipation is severe, increasing fibre may not help. You should speak to your doctor and discuss taking a bowel medicine.
- Once your liquid intake is at least 6 cups (1.5 litres) per day, add fibre slowly.
- You may get cramps, gas and diarrhea if you add fibre too quickly. If you are unable to drink well, focus on fibre from fruits.
- High fibre foods will hold fluids in the poo. This makes the poo softer and easier to pass. We need at least 25 grams of fibre per day.
- To learn more about how to add fibre to your diet, ask to see a registered dietitian.

If you have been told you are at risk for bowel obstruction, check with your health provider before adding fibre.

What foods are high in fibre?

- Fresh fruits (berries, apples with the skin, pears, plums, oranges, grapes)
- Fresh vegetables (corn, peas, spinach and other leafy greens)
- Whole grain breads, crackers and cereals (look for a cereal with more than 4 grams of dietary fibre per serving)
- Bran cereals, breads and muffins (you can also add 1 to 2 tablespoons of wheat bran to hot cereal)
- Cornmeal, brown rice, wild rice and barley
- Dried peas, beans and lentils (pea soup, baked beans)
- Dried fruits (dates, figs, prunes, raisins)

Some foods have natural laxatives, like prunes, prune juice, apples and pears. Try including these foods in your diet to help manage constipation.

If you are not able to drink well, focus on adding fruits if your diet allows extra sugar. Your constipation can get worse if you add cereal fibre without drinking more fluid.

Recipe: Fruit spread

1 cup raisins 1 cup dates
1 cup prunes 1 cup natural bran

1. Soak prunes in 1 cup water overnight. In the morning, drain prunes and keep juice. Remove pits from prunes.
2. Place raisins, dates and prunes in a blender. Blend until smooth.
3. Add juice and bran. Mix well.
4. Refrigerate in a sealed container.
5. Use as a spread on toast, as a dessert, or as a sauce over ice cream.

The development of patient education resources is supported by the Princess Margaret Cancer Foundation.



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