

# Know How to Maintain Good Bowel Function

## For women who have gynecologic cancer

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- What is the bowel
- What is good bowel function
- What is constipation
- What is a bowel obstruction
- What should I do if I think I have a bowel obstruction
- What can I do to help prevent a bowel obstruction

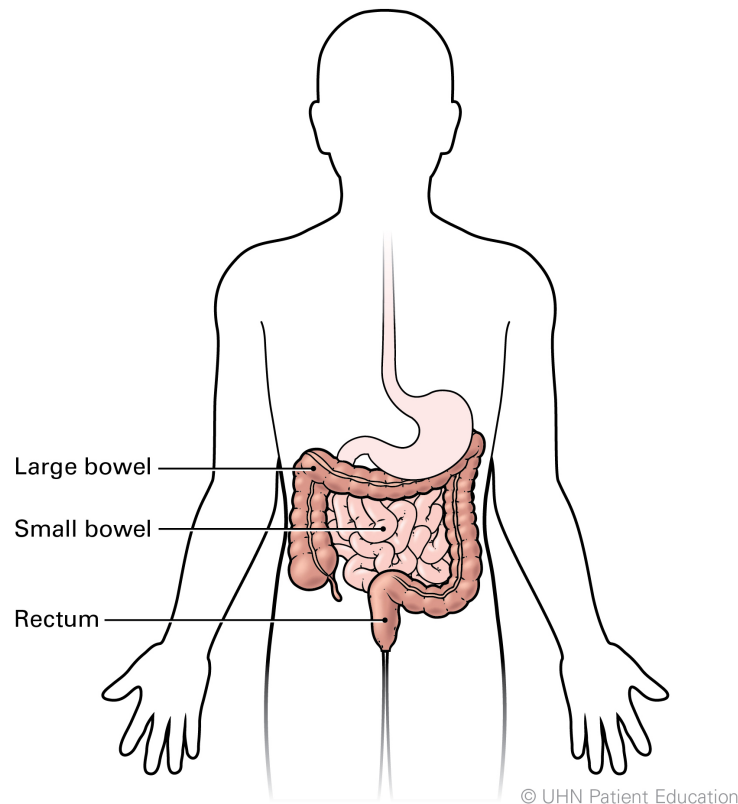


## What is the bowel?

The bowel has two parts, the small bowel and the large bowel. The small bowel absorbs (takes in) nutrients and fluids.

Nutrients come from the food you eat and drink. Nutrients give us energy and build muscle. The leftover nutrients (waste) that the body does not use moves to the large bowel.

The large bowel absorbs water from the leftover nutrients (waste). This waste then forms into stool (poo). The rectum stores stool (poo) until it passes out of your body.



This is an image of the small and large bowel and the rectum.

## What is good bowel function?

Good bowel function is stool (poo) that is soft and easy to pass (get out). Good bowel function happens on a regular basis, for example, every day or every other day.

## What is constipation?

Constipation means you are having bowel movements (poo) less often than is normal for you.

If you have constipation, your bowel movements (poo) may be:

- small
- hard
- dry
- hard to pass (get out)

Constipation may be a side effect of your:

- anti-nausea medicine Ondansetron hydrochloride (Zofran) or Granisetron hydrochloride (Kytril) hydrochloride
- pain medicines
- other medicines you may take

**Important:** If you have a colostomy or ileostomy, the information below does not apply to you. Ask your healthcare team for details on how to make sure your colostomy or ileostomy flows well. Ask your health care team to send you to a dietitian (an expert on diet and food) if you do not already have one.

## **What can I do to prevent constipation?**

- Drink 6 cups or 1.5 litres of fluids every day. Fluids mean any liquids that do not have alcohol in them.
- Stay active! Doing active things (for example, walking) may keep your bowels moving and help prevent constipation.
- You may need medicines to help treat and prevent constipation. The most common medicines prescribed are stimulant laxatives or osmotic laxatives.
  - A stimulant laxative causes the bowel to move in order to push the poo out. An example of a stimulant laxative is Senna (Senokot).
- An osmotic laxative keeps water in the bowel to soften the poo then pushes it out. Osmotic laxatives can come in the form of a powder, syrup or pill. Examples of osmotic laxatives are:
  - Polyethylene Glycol (PEG) also known as Restoralax/Lax-a-day. This medicine comes in powder form that you mix with water.
  - Lactulose, which is a thick, sweet syrup. This laxative can sometimes make you pass more gas.
  - Bisacodyl (Dulcolax), a stimulant and osmotic laxative taken in pill form.

Your health care team will tell you which laxatives are right for you based on your symptoms and what your stool (poo) looks like.

## **It is important that women with gynecologic cancer:**

- Do NOT take fibre supplements as they may increase the size of your poo and may make your constipation worse. Some examples include Psyllium (Metamucil) and Inulin (Benefibre). Only take fibre supplements if they are prescribed by your doctor.
- Do not use suppositories or enemas unless prescribed by your doctor

If you start to have diarrhea (watery or loose poo), DO NOT take Loperamide (Imodium) and call the Gynecology Resource Nurse at 416 946 2220 ext. 2

If you have not had a bowel movement for more than 2 days call the Gynecology Resource Nurse at 416 946 2220 ext. 2.

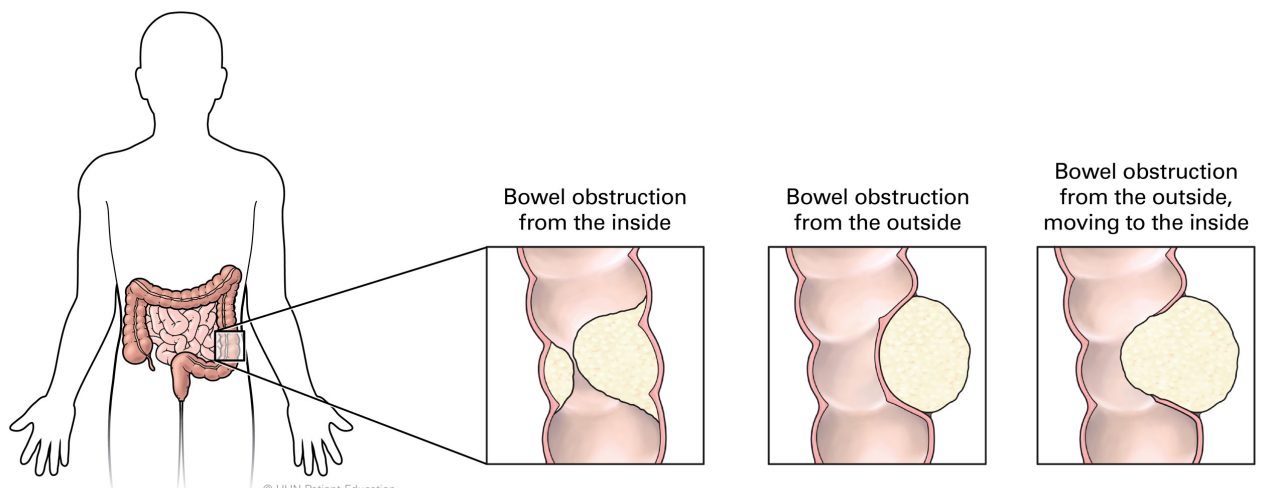
## If you have ovarian cancer

Women with ovarian cancer have a higher risk of having poor bowel function. They also have a higher risk of having a bowel obstruction. Ovarian cancer can cause the bowel to become narrow. This is because the cancer may press on the bowel. This pressure on the bowel can cause the bowel movement (poo) to get stuck.

Constipation is not the same as a bowel obstruction. Read more to learn about bowel obstruction.

## What is a bowel obstruction?

A bowel obstruction is when your small or large bowel is partly or fully blocked. The bowel becomes blocked when the bowel narrows because of cancer (see the image below). When the bowel is blocked, stool (poo) cannot move through the bowel in the normal way.



## **What are some of the symptoms (signs) of a bowel obstruction?**

- No bowel movement (poo) for more than 2 days (if this is different from your normal pattern)
- Nausea (feeling like you will throw up)
- Vomiting (throwing up)
- Abdominal (stomach) pain
- A bloated stomach (stomach feels swollen or very full)
- Not passing gas

## **What should I do if I think I have a bowel obstruction?**

If you have some of these symptoms, this may mean you have a bowel obstruction. If you are home, call the Gynecology Resource Nurse at 416 946 2220 ext. 2. If you have an appointment in the clinic, speak to your clinic nurse, or doctor about your symptoms.

### **If this happens at night, on a weekend or on a holiday**

- Call the Afterhours Carepath Cancer Nurse at 1 877 681 3057.
- Or go to your nearest hospital Emergency Department and tell the staff there that you are being cared for at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre for your cancer.

## **What can I do to help prevent a bowel obstruction?**

If you are at risk for a bowel obstruction, your health care team (cancer doctor or nurse) may prescribe (order) medicines. These medicines will keep your bowels soft and help make your bowels move. See page 4 for more details. Also your health care team (cancer doctor or nurse) may refer you to the gynecology dietitian (an expert on food and diet).

The dietitian will give you a special diet and tell you what foods to eat and what foods to avoid.

Here are some things you can do that may help to prevent a bowel obstruction:

- Chew solid food well. This helps your body to digest (break down) food. Chewing solid food well can help your body digest food more easily.
- Eat small meals. Include snacks during your day to help reduce discomfort (for example, pain or a bloated stomach).
- Avoid skins and seeds from fruits and vegetables. These foods are hard for your body to digest. They may become stuck if you have a bowel obstruction.
- Avoid foods with a lot of fibre, for example, leafy greens like spinach and lettuce. These foods are also hard to digest and may become stuck if you have a bowel obstruction.

You will get more information on what you need to do after you talk to the dietitian.



## For more information watch the video series “Bowel Obstruction for Women with Gynecologic Cancer” on YouTube:

- [Know How to Maintain Good Bowel Function](#)
- [Know if You Are at Risk of Bowel Obstruction](#)
- [Know What to Do if You have Bowel Obstruction](#)
- [Know About Medicines to Manage Bowel Function](#)
- [Know How Diet Helps to Manage Bowel Function](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaLgrtXadEF8JI-TtwYcaaYM1DnxksUI8>

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