

ONCOLOGY

After Chemotherapy Care Instructions

Constipation

What is constipation?

Cancer or cancer treatment may cause constipation. Constipation means you have a hard time passing stools (called bowel movements). People pass stools anywhere from three times a day to once every three days. What is normal for you may not be normal for another person. Constipation may cause pain in the rectum and cramping. The pain may get worse when you try to pass stools. Sometimes there are small amounts of bright red blood on toilet paper or on the surface of stools because of enlarged veins near the rectum (called hemorrhoids).

A few changes in your diet and lifestyle may help you avoid having constipation all the time. Your physician may also prescribe medicine to help loosen your stools.

What are the symptoms of constipation?

Constipation may cause you to have stools that are:

1. Too hard,
2. Too small,
3. Too difficult to expel, or
4. Too infrequent.

How is constipation treated?

Constipation can be treated by walking more; drinking at least 3 quarts of fluid per day, unless not advised by your physician; and eating foods high in fiber. Sometimes prune juice and warm fluids, especially in the morning, can help. If these remedies do not work, then you can try the following over-the-counter (no prescription needed) medicines:

- Senna (8.6 mg) and docusate sodium (100 mg). Take two of each at bedtime daily. You may need to increase to four of each two times a day, if needed. Use these medicines daily as the maintenance dose.
- If you do not have a bowel movement in any 48-hour period, try bisacodyl (Dulcolax). Take 2–3 tablets by mouth at bedtime, one time only. Increase the dose of senna and docusate sodium.
- If you do not have a bowel movement in any 72-hour period, try magnesium citrate (4–8 oz.) daily. It must be kept in the refrigerator.
- Suppositories or enemas. Check with your physician or nurse prior to use.

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continued

***What can I do
at home to care
for myself?***

- If the above plan does not relieve your constipation, contact your physician.

Drink plenty of fluids. Drink enough so that your urine is mostly clear. If you have kidney, heart, or liver disease and have to limit your fluids, talk to your physician before you increase the amount of fluids you drink.

To prevent constipation, follow these steps:

- Include high-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains, in your diet each day.
- Get at least 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week. Walking is a good choice. You also may want to do other activities, such as running, swimming, cycling, or playing tennis.
- Take a fiber supplement, such as Citrucel or Metamucil, everyday. Start with a small dose and very slowly increase the dose over a month or more.
- Schedule time each day for a bowel movement. A daily routine may help. Take your time having a bowel movement.
- Support your feet with a step stool when you sit on the toilet. This helps flex your hips and places your pelvis in a squatting position.
- Your physician may recommend an over-the-counter laxative to relieve your constipation. Examples are Milk of Magnesia, Ex-Lax, Colace, or Senokot. Be sure to read and follow all instructions on the label. Do not use laxatives on a long-term basis.

***When should I call
my physician?***

- Your stools are black and tar-like or have streaks of blood.
- You have new pain in your abdomen, or the pain gets worse.
- You are vomiting.
- Your constipation does not improve or it gets worse.
- You have other changes in your bowel habits, such as the size or shape of your stools.
- You have leaking of your stool.

If you cannot reach your health care team or your symptoms get worse, go to Urgent Care or the Emergency Department.