

Constipation in People with Cancer

Constipation is when you have bowel movements that are painful, that are hard to pass, or that are happening less often than normal for you. There are many causes for constipation in people with cancer, including:

- Medications
 - Pain medications (especially opioids)
 - Anti-nausea medications
 - Medications for treating depression (antidepressants) or anxiety
 - Sleep (insomnia) medications
- Cancer treatments (including certain types of chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery)
- Being less physically active
- Not drinking enough fluids

What can I do to help prevent constipation?

- Drink more fluids. Try to drink 8-10 glasses of water every day.
- Drink warm fluids 30 minutes before the time you usually have a bowel movement.
- Increase the amount of fiber in your diet. Fiber is found in foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
 - One way to add fiber to your diet is to mix together 1 cup of apple sauce, 1 cup of All-Bran® cereal, and 1 cup of prune juice. Eat 2-3 tablespoons of this mix every day and refrigerate any extra that you don't eat that day. You can change the amount you eat to manage your bowel movements, with the goal to have 1 bowel movement every 24 hours.

- Participate in exercise and activity as you're able. Even 15 minutes of walking per day can be helpful.

What can I do to treat constipation?

- Start taking a daily stool softener, such as Colace®.
- Start taking a daily laxative, such as MiraLAX®.
 - Take 1 capful once or twice a day. If you still have constipation after 24 hours, you can also start taking Senokot® (1-2 pills once or twice a day).
 - If you tried taking Senokot® and you still have not had a bowel movement after 24 hours, please contact your doctor for more advice.

When should I call the doctor?

Call your doctor if:

- You have not had a bowel movement in 4 or more days
- You notice blood in your stool (poop)
- You develop new nausea or vomiting
- You develop abdominal (stomach) pain or cramping
- You are not passing gas

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by University of Michigan (U-M) Health for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by U-M Health and for which U-M Health does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition, or your treatment plan.

Author: Paul Swiecicki, MD
Edited by: Brittany Batell, MPH MSW
Document #1915

Patient Education by [U-M Health](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last revised 04/2024