

# Constipation

Constipation is not having your usual number of bowel movements. You may have trouble passing stool, they maybe hard or you may not be able to empty your bowel completely. It is a common side effect of pain and anti-nausea medicines. Some chemotherapy drugs can also cause it.

Other causes are:

- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement.
- Not having enough time or privacy to use the toilet.
- Decreased activity or mobility.
- Decreased fluid intake.
- Not eating enough fiber from sources such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.
- Age.
- Medicine, such as:
  - Pain drugs.
  - Chemotherapy.
  - Anti-nausea drugs.
  - Antidepressants.
  - Anticonvulsants.
  - Antihypertensives/Calcium channel blockers.
  - Anti-histamines.
  - Antacids.
  - Dietary supplements such as iron and calcium.
- Illnesses, such as:
  - Diabetes.
  - Depression.
  - Diverticulosis.
  - Parkinson's disease.
  - Hypothyroidism.
  - Hypercalcemia.
  - Spinal cord compression.
  - Intestinal obstruction.

## Tips to Help Prevent or Treat Constipation

Use the suggestions below to help you prevent or treat constipation.

- Go to the bathroom at the same time everyday. Your body will get used to going at that time.
- If you feel the urge to go, do not put it off. Try to use the bathroom 5-15 minutes after meals. After breakfast is when you colon's reflex is the strongest.
- Exercise if you can; walking is an excellent form of exercise.
- Drink eight, 8-ounce glasses (2 liters) of fluid daily if you can. Some of the fluids you could have are water, juices, soups, ice cream shakes and other drinks that do not have caffeine. Beverages with caffeine pull fluid out of the body.
- Slowly increase the fiber in your diet. Aim for a total of 25 – 35 grams per day. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and cereals contain fiber. Ask your nurse for the “Fiber Fact Card.” **If you have an ostomy or have had recent bowel surgery, check with your doctor or nurse before making any changes in your diet.**

## Medications to Prevent or Treat Constipation

You can get the following medicines over the counter.

Start with:

\_\_\_\_ **Docusate sodium (Colace®)**

100 mg \_\_\_\_\_ capsules \_\_\_\_\_ times a day

This is a stool softener that causes few side effects. Do not take it with mineral oil.

\_\_\_\_ **Senna (Senokot®)**, 2 tablets at bedtime

This is a stimulant laxative. It can cause cramping. If you do not have a bowel movement after one day on this regimen, add two tablets of Senna. Take them each morning you do not have a bowel movement. Do this until you are taking six tablets in the morning. If you have diarrhea (liquid stools), stop taking it for one day. Resume taking it the next day at one-half of your previous dose. **If you have severe cramping, contact your doctor or nurse.**

If these methods do not help, your doctor or nurse may adjust the medicine or add others. You may need a prescription medicine.

## Prescription Medications

- Lactulose (Anulose®, Chronulac®, Cephulac®) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Drink plenty of water with each dose of lactulose. Use caution if you have diabetes.
- GoLytely®
- CoLyte®

## Over-the-Counter Medications

- Bulk-forming laxatives:
  - Psyllium (Metamucil®, Fiberall®, Perdiem®)
  - Polycarbophil (Fibercon®)
  - Methylcellulose (Citrucel®)

Do not use these if your constipation is due to pain medicine. These laxatives also must be taken with 4-8oz of fluid. Use caution if on fluid restriction or confined to bed. You must also use caution if you have strictures or a partial blockage.

- Osmotic laxatives:
  - Polyethylene glycol (Miralax®)
- Saline laxatives:
  - Magnesium hydroxide (Milk of Magnesia®) or magnesium citrate

**If you have a kidney or heart problem, check with your doctor or nurse before starting a saline laxative.**

## Key Points

- **Call your doctor or nurse if you have not had a bowel movement for two days.**
- If you have diarrhea after taking any of the medicines listed above, ask your doctor or nurse what you should do. Do not take any medication to manage the diarrhea without speaking to them.
- **Do not use suppositories or enemas unless your doctor or nurse tells you to.**
- Please contact your doctor or nurse if you have any questions.

