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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Constipation

This information describes the signs and causes of constipation. It also describes ways to prevent and treat constipation.

## About Constipation

Constipation is a common problem that makes it hard to have bowel movements (poop).

Your bowel movements or stool (poop) might be:

- Too hard
- Too small
- Hard to get out
- Happening fewer than 3 times a week

If you're having any of the signs listed above, you might be constipated.

## Causes of Constipation



Please visit [www.mskcc.org/pe/chemo\\_constipation](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/chemo_constipation) to watch this video.

Constipation can be caused by many things, including:

- Medications, such as:
  - Pain medication
  - Chemotherapy

- Antiemetics (medications to control nausea)
- Antidepressants (medications to help manage depression)
- Anticonvulsants (medications to prevent seizures)
- Blood pressure medication
- Antihistamines (allergy medications)
- Antacids, such as Tums® or Rolaids®
- Dietary supplements (vitamins), such as iron and calcium
- Medical conditions, such as:
  - Diabetes
  - Depression
  - Parkinson's disease
  - Hypothyroidism (a condition in which your thyroid gland doesn't produce enough hormones)
  - Hypercalcemia (too much calcium in your blood)
  - Spinal cord compression (pressure on the spinal cord from a tumor or injury)
  - Intestinal obstruction (a blockage in your intestines)
- Other things, such as:
  - Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
  - Not having enough time or privacy to have a bowel movement
  - Inactivity, such as not moving around or walking enough.
  - Not drinking enough liquids
  - Not eating enough fiber
  - Old age

# Lifestyle Changes to Prevent and Treat Constipation



Please visit [www.mskcc.org/pe/constipation\\_after\\_surgery](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/constipation_after_surgery) to watch this video.

To prevent and treat constipation, try the following lifestyle changes:

- Go to the bathroom at the same time every day. Your body will get used to going at that time. But, if you feel like you need to go, don't put it off.
- Try to use the bathroom 5 to 15 minutes after meals. After breakfast is a good time to move your bowels. This is when the reflexes in your colon are the strongest.
- Exercise, if you can. Walking is an excellent form of exercise. Exercise helps your body move food through your large intestines (colon), which can make it easier to have a bowel movement.
- Drink 8 to 10 (8-ounce) glasses (2 to 2.5 liters) of liquids daily, if you can. Drink water, juices (such as prune juice), soups, ice cream shakes, and other drinks that don't have caffeine. Try to avoid drinking more than 1 caffeinated drink per day. Drinks with caffeine, such as coffee and soda, pull fluid out of your body and can make you dehydrated.
- Slowly increase the fiber in your diet to 25 to 35 grams per day. If you have an ostomy or have had recent bowel surgery, check with your healthcare provider before making any changes in your diet. Foods high in fiber include:
  - Bran
  - Whole-grain cereals and bread
  - Unpeeled fruits and vegetables
  - Mixed green salads
  - Apricots, figs, and raisins
  - Nuts and beans

Read the resource *Food Sources of Fiber* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/food\\_sources\\_fiber](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/food_sources_fiber)) for information about the amount of fiber found in many foods.

## Medications for Constipation

You can also use medications to treat constipation and help you have a bowel movement. Both over-the-counter (medications you get without a prescription) and prescription medications are available to treat constipation. It's important to talk with your healthcare provider about which medications are right for you before taking any over-the-counter medications.

Laxatives are medications that help you have a bowel movement in different ways. Below is a list of some common over-the-counter laxatives.

Start by taking 1 of these medications after talking about it with your healthcare provider.

### Common over-the-counter laxatives

#### Stool softeners

Stool softeners, such as docusate sodium (Colace®), increase the amount of water in your stool, making it softer and easier to pass. They also cause few side effects. Take stool softeners as often as instructed by your healthcare provider. Don't take any stool softeners while taking mineral oil.

#### Osmotic laxatives

Osmotic laxatives, such as polyethylene glycol (MiraLAX®), use water in your body to soften your stool and ease it through your colon so you can have a bowel movement. Side effects aren't common, but osmotic laxatives may cause nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up), bloating, and gas.

#### Stimulant laxatives

Stimulant laxatives, such as senna (Senokot®), make you have a bowel movement by speeding up muscle movement in your colon. Stimulant laxatives may cause cramping. They're best to take at bedtime.

## Bulk-forming laxatives

Bulk-forming laxatives, such as psyllium (Metamucil<sup>®</sup>, Fiberall<sup>®</sup>, Perdiem<sup>®</sup>), make a more liquid-like stool that's softer and easier to pass. Other types include polycarbophil (Fibercon<sup>®</sup>) and methylcellulose (Citrucel<sup>®</sup>). You should take these with 8 ounces of liquid, such as water. Bulk-forming laxatives may cause bloating and gas.

- Talk with your healthcare provider before using bulk-forming laxatives if you:
  - Can't get out of bed.
  - Can only have a small amount of liquids every day.
  - Have strictures (sections in your intestine that are narrower than others), or a partial blockage in your intestine.
  - Are constipated because of pain medication.

## Suppositories and enemas

- Don't use suppositories (medication that's inserted through your anus) unless your healthcare provider tells you to.
- Don't use enemas unless your healthcare provider tells you to. An enema is when liquid is put into your rectum (bottom of your colon) through your anus to cause a bowel movement.

Follow the instructions on the label or given by your healthcare provider when taking any of these medications.

If these medications don't help, talk with your healthcare provider. They may change the medication, suggest other medications, or recommend prescription medication.

# When to Call Your Healthcare Provider

Call your healthcare provider if:

- You haven't had a bowel movement for 3 days.
- You have diarrhea (loose or watery bowel movements) after taking any of the medications listed above. Don't take any medication to manage your diarrhea without talking to your healthcare provider first.
- You have any questions or concerns.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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