

Constipation Management

What is constipation?

Constipation is difficulty having bowel movements. You might have fewer bowel movements than usual and/or they might be small, hard, or difficult to have. You might feel like you need to have a bowel movement but cannot. Other symptoms can include belly pain, cramps, feeling like you have gas, bloating, nausea, and vomiting. You could also feel confused or have difficulty urinating.

Constipation affects about half of all people with cancer. Tell your health care team if you have constipation. You may feel embarrassed talking about this, but do not let those feelings stop you from getting help. Your health care team wants to know this information. It is important to your treatment, and they can also help relieve the discomfort.

What causes constipation?

Constipation can be caused by prescription medications, such as anti-nausea medications, some chemotherapy medicines, and pain medicines, which can slow down your digestion. Vitamin supplements may also cause constipation, especially if they include calcium or iron.

Cancer might cause constipation in several ways. The bowel, or intestines, is where waste stays until you have a bowel movement. Surgery or radiation therapy to the belly area might cause scar tissue around or inside your bowel. This can stop waste from leaving your body. Cancer in the bowel can also block stool from passing through. Cancer might also slow the bowel from moving things through. Doctors call these conditions “bowel obstructions.” In rare cases, cancer can press on the spinal cord and cause constipation.

Eating too little, getting too little fluid or fiber in your diet, and not exercising are common lifestyle causes of constipation. Medical conditions such as diabetes, thyroid gland problems, too much calcium in the blood, or too little potassium can cause constipation, too.

What are the risks of constipation?

Constipation is uncomfortable. The longer you stay constipated, the more uncomfortable you can become. Constipation can damage your digestive system or rectum, the area where bowel movements leave the body. You might get dehydrated if you are not drinking enough fluid, and medicines you take by mouth might not work quickly.

For more information and helpful videos, visit echoassociates.org/education

Source: American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO)



Constipation Management

How to prevent and treat constipation

You can do several things to prevent or treat constipation. Talk with a member of your health care team first, to make sure these are safe to try.

- Drink more fluids. Ask a member of the health care team how much fluid you should drink each day.
- Add fiber to your diet, such as bran and whole grains. But check with your health care team first, especially if you had surgery in the belly area.
- Take anti-constipation medications like stool softeners and laxatives. Check with your health care team before taking these medications.
- Be active, if possible. Ask how much activity is safe and which exercises are best. Your doctor may recommend taking a slow walk every hour or just moving around and changing positions. Or, your health care team may be able to recommend exercise classes for people with cancer.

Talk with your health care team before you take any medicines or vitamin supplements, including a suppository or enema (medicine you put in the rectum). Some people taking chemotherapy should not take suppositories or enemas if they have a risk of lower blood counts. It is important to confirm with your health care team what is safe to take. This is also to avoid taking medicines or supplements that might interact with your cancer treatments.

Tests and information

Your doctor might need to check your rectum. You might also need an X-ray or another type of scan. These tests can show if hard stool or a tumor is blocking your digestive system.

Your health care team might also ask how often you had bowel movements before cancer and how often you do now. Keep track of your bowel movements, write down the medicines you take, what you eat and drink, and any other health problems you have.

For more information and helpful videos, visit echoassociates.org/education

Source: American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO)

