

Understanding and Managing Treatment-Related Constipation

What is constipation?

- Constipation is when your bowel movements occur less often than usual, or if your bowel movements are hard, dry, or painful to pass.

What should I know about constipation?

- You have dry and/or hard stool.
- You have to strain to move your bowels.
- Your stools are difficult or painful to pass.
- You feel pressure in your rectum, as if you have not fully emptied your bowels.
- You have cramps or stomach aches.
- You feel nauseous, bloated, or have excess gas.

What puts me at risk of experiencing constipation?

- Certain cancer treatments, including chemotherapy, fibrosis from radiation therapy, postoperative scarring from surgery to the gut, or stem cell or bone marrow transplant.
- Certain medical conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, hypothyroidism, or depression.
- Certain medications such as opioid pain medications and antinausea medications.
- Eating a low fiber diet.
- Taking supplements with calcium or iron.
- Eating a lot of high-fat foods, like cheese.
- Not drinking enough water.
- Limited mobility or not getting enough activity.
- Delaying bowel movement when you feel the urge.
- Stress.

How is constipation diagnosed?

- Your care team may ask you to describe:
 - When constipation first started.
 - About how often you are having bowel movements.
 - The color and consistency.
 - If there is any blood.
 - Any recent dietary changes or new food sensitivities?
 - Any new medication changes?
- Your care team may request:

- Blood tests to check for related medical conditions.
- X-rays or other imaging to look for other causes of constipation.

What can happen if my symptoms are not managed?

- Pain, itching and swelling around the anus, which can be signs of hemorrhoids.
- A tear or fissure around the anus, which can cause pain and bleeding.
- Buildup of stool in your gut, which can cause a blockage.
- In severe cases, blockage can lead to a hole in the gut called perforation. Symptoms of this include pain, swelling, nausea, and fever.

What can I do to prevent or lessen constipation?

- Drink at least 8 glasses of noncaffeinated fluid every day, such as water, fruit or vegetable juices, and other clear liquids, like broth or sports drinks. Speak to your pharmacist or care team about oral rehydration solutions found over the counter at the pharmacy.
- Drink warm liquids, such as coffee and tea.
- Stay active every day. Walking is a simple activity that is convenient and easy to do. If you have limited mobility, try seated chair exercises.
- Eat foods that are high in fiber, such as thoroughly washed fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, prunes, nuts, seeds, popcorn, and high-fiber cereals. Increased fiber intake should be accompanied by increased fluids.

What can I do to treat constipation at home?

- There are several types of over-the-counter medications such as stool softeners or laxatives to help with constipation. Check with your care team for guidance before trying these.

What might my care team provide to help?

- Medications might be prescribed by your provider to prevent or treat constipation, including laxatives or stool softeners. Take these medications as directed.

When should I call my care team?

- Call your care team if you experience any of the following symptoms:
- You have new or worsening pain in your stomach.
- You have not had a bowel movement for more than 3 days.
- You are unable to pass gas.
- You have pain or itching in your rectal area.
- You have a fever of over 100.4°F.
- You are having nausea or vomiting with your constipation.
- Your stomach looks swollen, feels hard, or is painful to the touch.
- You develop diarrhea after taking medications to manage your constipation.

How can I tell if my constipation is getting better?

- Your constipation improves when your stools soften or become more regular and easier to pass without straining.

What questions should I ask my care team about constipation?

- Is it helpful for me to track my symptoms? What do you recommend?
- Do any of my other medical conditions increase my chance of experiencing constipation?
- Do any of the medications I take for other conditions contribute to constipation?
- Do you recommend any changes to my medications to help prevent or control constipation?
- What lifestyle changes do you recommend managing my constipation?
- What are my options if my constipation cannot be controlled while I am receiving cancer treatment?

Where can I find out more information about constipation?

Constipation: Cancer Treatment Side Effect | National Cancer Institute

- <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/constipation>

Constipation | American Cancer Society

- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/constipation.html>

Constipation | Cancer.net

- <https://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/physical-emotional-and-social-effects-cancer/managing-physical-side-effects/constipation>

Notes

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