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# Constipation during cancer treatment

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## What is constipation?

- Constipation is when you are having bowel movements (going poo) less often than normal.
- Not everyone has a bowel movement every day and that is okay.
- It is okay to go every 2 to 3 days as long as your bowel movements are soft and easy to pass.
- If you are eating less you may go less often.
- Some medications (like anti-cancer, anti-nausea or opioid pain medications) can cause constipation.

## These things can help to prevent constipation:

- **Drink more liquids.**  
Drink at least 6 to 8 cups of liquids each day unless you have been told otherwise by your healthcare team. Hot drinks may help you to have a bowel movement.
- **Be active.**  
Exercise can help to keep you regular.
- **Eat more fibre.**  
If you have mild constipation, eating more fibre may help. High fibre foods like fruits, vegetables, bran, and whole grains can help to make your stool softer and easier to pass. If you take opioid pain medication (like morphine) ask your healthcare team if eating more fibre is right for you.

## These are some signs of constipation to watch for:

- The need to push hard and strain to get any stool (poo) to come out
- Small, hard and dry stools that look like pellets
- Leaking of stools
- Stomach ache or cramps
- A bloated belly, feeling of fullness, or discomfort
- Lots of gas or burping
- Nausea or vomiting

## When should you contact your healthcare team?

Call your healthcare team if you have not had a bowel movement for 3 or more days (or 2 days if you are taking laxatives regularly). You may need medication to have regular bowel movements.

## Contact your healthcare team or go to your nearest emergency room right away if you have:

- Blood in your stools
- Black stools
- Abdominal (belly) cramps that last for more than 2 days

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## Steps to manage your constipation

- The steps below do not replace advice from your healthcare team.
- Talk to your healthcare team if you have any questions

### Step 1: Try to prevent constipation.

- Drink enough liquids (6-8 cups each day)
- Exercise often
- Follow a balanced diet with lots of fibre-rich foods

### Step 2: Take a laxative if you get constipated (no bowel movements for 2 to 3 days). There are 2 types of laxatives you can try.

**Osmotic laxatives** bring water into the stool to make it easier to pass. They work in 1 to 4 days.

- **Lactulose** (Acilac®) 667 mg/mL: Take 15 mL (1 tablespoon) once a day. If this does not work, you can slowly increase your dose by 15 mL (1 tablespoon) a day up to 30 mL (2 tablespoons) twice a day. If you are still constipated then you may need higher doses. Talk to your healthcare provider before taking more. **OR**
- **Polyethylene glycol** (Lax-a-day®, Restoralax®): Dissolve 17 g of powder in 125 to 250 mL of liquid (like water or juice) and drink once a day. If you are still constipated then you may need a higher dose. Talk to your healthcare provider before taking more.

#### AND/OR

**Stimulant laxatives** trigger your body to have a bowel movement. They work in 6 to 12 hours

- **Sennoside** (Senokot®) 8.6 mg tablets: Take 1 to 4 tablets at bedtime to start. You can slowly increase this amount, if needed, up to 4 tablets twice a day. Do not take more than 8 tablets in a day. **OR**
- **Bisacodyl** (Dulcolax®) 5 mg tablets: Take 1 to 3 tablets at bedtime to start. You can slowly increase this amount, if needed, up to 3 tablets taken 3 times a day. Do not take more than 9 tablets in a day.

### Step 3: If you are still constipated after taking laxatives, contact your healthcare team.

- They may recommend a different treatment like a suppository or an enema.
- Do not use a suppository or an enema unless your healthcare team has told you they are safe for you.

#### Need this information in an accessible format?

1-855-460-2647, TTY (416) 217-1815, [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

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