

# Constipation during cancer treatment



Constipation is having difficulty opening your bowels or passing hard, dry bowel motions (stools/poo) less often than normal. It is important to tell your doctor or nurse if you have constipation.

## What are the symptoms?

*When you are constipated you don't open your bowels as often as usual.*

When you do go, you may:

- have hard, dry bowel motions (stools/poo or faeces) that can be painful to pass
- need to strain to pass the bowel motion
- need to sit on the toilet for much longer than usual
- feel that your bowel hasn't fully emptied.

You may also have:

- a bloated or swollen abdomen
- stomach cramps
- a headache
- a loss of appetite
- nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting (throwing up)
- liquid diarrhoea that you can't control, called overflow diarrhoea.

## What causes constipation?

Constipation can happen for a number of reasons. These include:

- certain medicines, like some chemotherapy, anti-sickness medicines or painkillers
- having a diet low in fibre (not eating enough grains, fruit and vegetables)
- not drinking enough water
- not moving or exercising enough
- ignoring the urge to have a bowel motion

- some medical conditions e.g. diabetes, thyroid problems or having had a stroke
- scar tissue from surgery or the cancer pressing on the bowel can cause narrowing or a blockage of the bowel.

## ! Important

### Contact your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist if:

- you develop sudden, severe abdominal pain and bloating (a hard swollen abdomen)
- you suddenly start vomiting (throwing up)
- it has been more than 3 days since you had a bowel motion
- you have blood in your bowel motions
- you have uncontrolled liquid bowel motions, after being constipated
- you are unable to pass wind.

**If you can't contact your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist go to the nearest hospital emergency department for help.**

Drink lots of liquids (unless you are on a fluid restriction).

Most people need to drink at least 8-10 glasses (about 2 litres) of liquid every day. Choose water, fruit or vegetable juices.

## Tips to help to prevent or treat constipation

- Treat constipation early before it becomes severe.
- Take medicines for constipation as advised by your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.
- Drink plenty of fluids (unless you are on a fluid restriction).
- Do some gentle exercise, like walking, yoga, tai chi, swimming or cycling.
- Try to establish a regular bowel routine.
- Include fibre in your diet (unless you have been told to avoid fibre).
- If you are having radiation therapy speak to your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist before you take medicines for constipation or change your diet.
- If you need help with your diet, your doctor or nurse can refer you to a dietitian.

### You can increase the amount of fibre in your diet by having:

- oats and wheat bran
- whole-grain cereals
- whole-grain rice or pasta
- whole-wheat and grain bread
- fresh fruit and vegetables
- dried fruit seeds and nuts
- a variety of beans such as baked beans, kidney beans and green beans.

## Common questions

### Why is constipation a problem?

It is uncomfortable and affects how you feel.

If left untreated constipation can cause a bowel blockage (obstruction). Bowel blockage can become a serious problem.

If you are having radiation therapy to your pelvis, constipation can affect your treatment.

### Can medicines help with constipation?

There are a number of medicines that work in different ways to help prevent or treat constipation. You may hear these called laxatives or aperients.

It is very important to take these medicines as directed. Ask your doctor, nurse, radiation therapist or pharmacist for advice.

## What to ask your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist

- What can I do to prevent constipation?
- What medicines can I take for constipation?
- Should I keep a diary of my diet and how often I have bowel motions?
- Do I need to see a dietitian?

### Who to contact in an emergency

Daytime: \_\_\_\_\_

Night/weekend: \_\_\_\_\_



For information for patient and carers please scan the QR code.