

Constipation related to cancer treatments (chemotherapy or radiation therapy)



You may have some side effects during your treatments. Constipation is one of them. Here are some simple, effective ways to relieve and prevent constipation.

Constipation means bowel movements that are hard to pass or infrequent. Everyone is different, but normally, you should have a bowel movement at least once every three days. If you're constipated, you won't go as often as usual. You may also see some of the following signs:

- dry, hard stools
- bloating (your belly feels swollen)
- nausea (feeling like you want to vomit)
- gas (flatulence)
- stomach cramps or pressure on the rectum
- belching

What causes constipation?

Various factors can cause constipation :

- the cancer itself
- cancer treatment
- some anti-nausea drugs that are taken with chemotherapy
- some pain medication (morphine or codeine)
- not getting enough fibre in your diet
- not drinking enough liquids (water, juice, milk)
- not getting enough physical activity

What should I do to prevent and treat constipation?

Here are some tips :

- drink 8 to 10 glasses (2 to 2.5 litres) of liquid every day - **unless your doctor tells you to limit your liquids intake**
- eat more fibre-rich foods: dates, raisins, dried fruit, wholegrain bread and pasta, fruit and vegetables, nuts and legumes, brown rice and popcorn - unless your team tells you otherwise
- choose cereals with more than 4 grams of fibre per portion, such as All-Bran
- get regular exercise, according to your abilities: yoga, tai chi, walking, cycling, etc.
- consume natural laxatives such as prunes and prune juice, rhubarb, and papaya



What should I do if I still haven't had a bowel movement?

If you haven't moved your bowels **for 3 days or longer**, contact your care team. They will evaluate your situation and give you some tips on how to deal with constipation.

What treatment can I take for constipation?

Don't take anything until your nurse has evaluated your health status. Then she may recommend the following treatment.

The treatment includes 2 medications that affect the intestines: an emollient or **stool softener**, and a **laxative**, which stimulates bowel movements. You can get these medications at the drugstore without a prescription. Or your doctor may give you a prescription.

Stool softener

Docusate sodium (also known as Colace)

Laxative

Sennosides (also known as Senokot)



ATTENTION

Don't start this treatment unless a member of your care team asks you to do so.

STEP 1

Take 2 Colace (2 x 100 mg) and 2 Senokot (2 x 8.6 mg), **once** a day at any time, for 2 days.

STEP 2

If you still haven't had a bowel movement after two days of this treatment, take 2 Colace (2 x 100 mg) and 2 Senokot (2 x 8.6 mg), **twice** a day, morning and evening, for 2 days.

Stop taking the medication if you have diarrhea (frequent or loose bowel movements).

What signs and symptoms should I watch for?

Tell your care team right away if:

- you feel any pain or discomfort in your belly
- you have not had a bowel movement for 3 days or more
- you notice that your belly feels hard
- you have stomach cramps

Where should I go for help or answers to my questions?

If you have questions, feel free to contact a member of your care team.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society:

> **1 888 939-3333**

> **cancer.ca**

Cancer information → Diagnosis and treatment → Managing side effects → Constipation

National Cancer Institute (U.S.):

> **cancer.gov**

About cancer → Cancer treatment → Side effects → Constipation

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available (in French only). Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site

chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
chumontreal.qc.ca