

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)
- too little exercise or too much rest

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**
- choose bread made of whole grain or bran (wheat or oat) instead of white bread.
- eat whole almonds, sesame seeds, peanuts, and shredded dried coconut
- for vegetables, opt for frozen or canned peas, corn niblets, boiled spinach, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, and green beans
- for fruit, try dates and dried figs, bananas, raspberries, apricots, prunes, raisins, pears and rhubarb (fresh or cooked)
- eat legumes, such as white beans, lentils, and chickpeas
- 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?

Before starting any treatment, your nurse should assess you. Then she may recommend the following treatment.

The treatment includes 2 medications that work on the bowel: a **hyperosmotic** (which softens the stools) and a **laxative** (which helps expel stools). These medications are sold in pharmacies without a prescription. They can also be prescribed by your doctor or pivot nurse.

Hyperosmotic

Polyethylene glycol oral powder (e.g. Lax-A-Day)

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 17 g of Lax-A-Day **once** a day and 2 Senokot capsules (2 x 8.6 mg) **twice** 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 17 g of Lax-A-Day and 2 Senokot capsules (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.

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