

Cancer and Constipation

Everyone has different bowel habits. Some people have a bowel movement 1–2 times a day, while others have them more or less often.

It is important that you know what is normal for you. Even if you are eating very little, you should still have small, soft and regular bowel movements.

What is a bowel movement?

- After food has been digested and moved through the body, it leaves the body as poop. This is called a bowel movement. Poop can also be called feces or stool.
- It is important to have regular bowel movements that are soft and easy to pass.

What is constipation?

- Having bowel movements less often than what is normal for you.
- Bowel movements that are difficult or painful to pass because the poop is hard and dry.

What causes constipation?

- Taking certain pain medications
- Some medications used with cancer treatments
- Other factors like not drinking enough water, eating low fibre foods, and not being active

What can I do to help prevent constipation?

1. Drink more liquids

- Drink 8–10 cups of liquids each day

2. Be active

- Move your body and exercise

3. Eat more fibre

- Eat fibre-rich foods at meals and snacks. These include whole grains, vegetables, and fruits.

Tips to drink enough liquids:

- Drink water throughout the day
- Avoid or limit alcohol and caffeinated drinks
- Eat soups, smoothies, and meals with sauces
- Include nutrition supplement drinks (like Boost® or Ensure®) with meals

Fiber Supplements

Fibre supplements (like Metamucil®) can make constipation worse. These products add bulk to your bowel movements. Stop taking fibre supplements as soon as you start taking laxatives.

What is a bowel routine?

- A bowel routine is a schedule of taking medications like laxatives to help prevent constipation.
- We recommend you start a bowel routine to prevent constipation.
- Recommended bowel routine medications include Sennosides and Polyethylene Glycol powder. You can buy these at a pharmacy without a prescription.

Sennosides

Sennosides (such as Senokot®) stimulate your body to poop and are called stool pushers. It helps to push the stool along and out of the bowel. Sennosides take at least 6–24 hours to start to work.

- Follow the instructions on the label.
- If you have not have a bowel movement by 48–72 hours, contact your healthcare team.

PolyethyleneGlycol Powder (PEG)

PEG (such as RestoraLAX®, Relax® or Lax-a-Day®) works by holding water in the stool to soften it. PEG is a powder you mix into liquid.

- Follow package instructions for a dose of 17 grams.
- Mix 17 grams of PEG in 1 cup of water, juice, tea, or coffee. Stir until completely dissolved.
- Drink the entire dose within 15–20 minutes.

What do I do if I start having diarrhea?

Diarrhea is when your bowel movements are watery and happen 3 or more times a day. If you start to have diarrhea, stop taking the bowel routine medication.

How do I know if I'm still constipated?

You are still constipated if you have 1 or more of the following:

- If you haven't had a bowel movement for 3 days
- Straining during a bowel movement
- Small, hard and dry stool that look like pellets
- Gas, bloating or lots of burping
- Watery poop with little or no solid pieces in it

Tell your healthcare team if you have:

- no bowel movement for 3 days or more
- severe abdominal pain or cramping
- nausea, and vomiting
- blood in your stool
- fever



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