

How to Manage your Constipation

What is cancer-related constipation?

Constipation means that you are having bowel movements (going poo) less often than normal and the stool (poo) is often dry and hard to pass. Constipation is common for people with cancer.

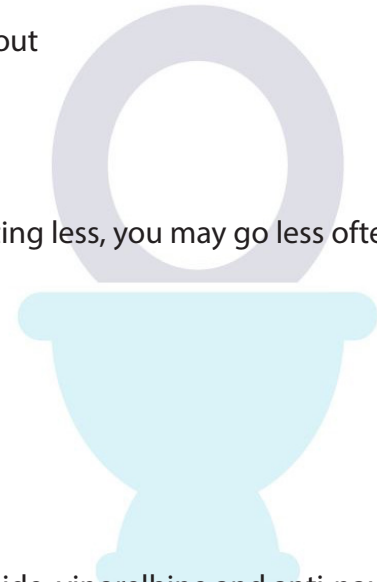
You may be constipated if:

- You have to push hard and strain to get anything to come out
- You feel the need to have a bowel movement but nothing will come out
- You have a stomach ache or cramps
- You have a lot of gas, bloated belly or feeling of fullness
- You are nauseous or vomiting

Not everyone has a bowel movement (goes poo) every day. If you are eating less, you may go less often. As long as your poo is soft and easy to pass, it is okay to go every 2-3 days.

What causes cancer-related constipation?

- Medications, like opioid pain medication
- Not drinking enough liquids
- Taking vitamins or supplements with calcium or iron
- A tumour in your belly that is getting in the way of your bowels
- Eating certain foods or not enough fibre
- Some chemotherapies or other medications, like vincristine, thalidomide, vinorelbine and anti-nauseants
- Not getting enough exercise and activity
- Other medical problems
- Stress, anxiety, depression
- Putting off going to the bathroom because you do not have privacy



What can I do to manage my constipation?

Use laxatives to manage constipation

Laxatives are medicines that help you have a bowel movement (go poo). If you take medication or get treatments that cause constipation, your doctor will tell you to take laxatives to keep you regular. If you have not had a bowel movement in 2-3 days and think you are constipated, you may need to take a laxative, or take more laxatives to get things moving. Ask your health care team what to do.

Eat more fibre

If you have mild constipation, eating more fibre may help. High fibre foods help make your stool (poo) softer and easier to pass. (If you take opioid pain medication or have a bowel obstruction, **talk to your health care team before adding fibre to your diet.**)

Drink more liquids

Liquids add water to your stool (poo), making it softer and easier to pass. Drink at least 6-8 cups of liquids each day. If drinking liquids is hard, take small sips often or eat watery fruit.

Be active

Exercise can help to keep you regular. Even a little bit more activity may help. If you are not active, start with light exercise like walking, stretching or gentle yoga. Walk to the end of your driveway or walk up and down your hall way. Go at your own pace and slowly raise the amount and difficulty of exercise.

Use complimentary therapies

Some patients find acupuncture, biofeedback and abdominal (belly) massage helpful. Check with your health care team to see if complementary therapies are right for you.

Make a bathroom routine

- Try to have a bowel movement (go poo) first thing in the morning or after a meal.
- Try to go to the bathroom around the same time each day.
- Make sure you are alone and comfortable when using the bathroom. Ask others to give you privacy if you need to.
- Put a low footstool under your feet when sitting on the toilet. This puts you in a better position.
- Do not push hard or strain when trying to pass stool (poo). Take your time and try to relax.

When should I talk to my health care team?

Tell your health care team right away if you have any of these symptoms:

- You have not passed any stool (poo) in more than 3 days
- Bright red blood in your stool
- Very dark or black stool
- Are not passing gas
- Bloating or pain in your stomach
- Nausea and vomiting (throwing up)



For more information, talk to your health care team or visit www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms



Information adapted from Cancer Care Ontario's How to Manage Your Symptoms - patient guides.

This is information only and does not replace medical advice. Always ask your health care provider if you have any questions or concerns.