

Steps to Treat Constipation with Over-the-Counter Medicine

Constipation is when you are not able to have a bowel movement for several days or have stools that are hard or difficult to pass. Common symptoms of constipation include hard, dry stool, stomach pain, bloating, nausea, vomiting or loss of appetite. This side effect may be caused by the cancer itself or any of the following:

- Chemotherapy medicine
- Pain medicines, including opioids
- Other medicines
- Dehydration
- Lack of fiber in your diet
- Lack of activity
- Diabetes
- Surgery
- Other medical conditions, including nerve damage and spinal cord injury

There is no “normal” number of bowel movements. The number of bowel movements is different for everyone. You may have 2 to 3 bowel movements each day or 2 to 3 bowel movements each week.

Things You Can Do to Manage Constipation

- Go to the bathroom right away when you have the urge to have a bowel movement. **Do not** try to hold it.
- Unless told otherwise by your doctor, drink 8 to 10 cups of non-caffeinated fluid each day to stay hydrated.
- Stay active and exercise, each day if possible.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

- Increase the amount of high fiber food you eat with foods such as:
 - ▶ Fresh, raw fruits and vegetables
 - ▶ Whole grain products (cereals, breads, bran)
 - ▶ Prunes
 - ▶ Nuts
 - ▶ Dates

Note: If you are on a low bacterial diet, do not eat fresh fruits, vegetables or nuts. Cooked fruits and vegetables are okay.

How to Treat Your Constipation

Over-the-counter medicines, including stool softeners and laxatives, can help treat your constipation. These medicines can be used together to help you have a bowel movement. Follow these steps to help treat your constipation.

Step	Medicine	Directions
1	Senna (Sennakot)	Take 1 pill, 2 times each day. If needed, take 2 pills, 2 times each day.
	OR	
	Polyethylene glycol 3350 or PEG (Miralax)	Mix 1 cap (17 grams) of powder in 8 ounces of water, juice, soda, sports drink, coffee or tea, 1 to 2 times each day. If you have fluid restrictions or kidney disease, talk with your doctor first.
2	If you do not have a bowel movement within 1 to 2 days after you take senna or Miralax, add the other agent (either senna or Miralax) and use together.	

3	If you do not have a bowel movement within 1 to 2 days after you take senna and Miralax, use 1 of the medicines listed below. Keep taking senna and/or Miralax.	
	Bisacodyl Suppository	Insert 1 suppository into your rectum. Do not use more than 1 suppository. Do not use within 2 weeks after chemotherapy.
	Fleets Enema	Use 1 enema and follow the directions on the package. Do not use more than 1 enema. Do not use within 2 weeks after chemotherapy.
	Magnesium Citrate	Drink ½ bottle. If needed, drink the rest of the bottle 8 hours after your first dose.
4	Call your doctor if you have not had a bowel movement within 1 to 2 days after using these steps to treat your constipation.	

Stop taking all of the above medicines if you have diarrhea. **Do not** take your constipation medicine again until your diarrhea has stopped. Talk with your health care provider if you have concerns about what medicines to take to treat constipation.

When to Call Your Doctor

It is important to call your doctor's office if you have any of the following:

- Severe stomach pain or cramps
- Bloody, bright red or black stool
- Severe nausea and vomiting
- Changes in color or firmness of your stools
- No bowel movement after you have done all 4 steps