

Constipation and Opioid (Pain Medicine) Use

Constipation is when you are not able to have a bowel movement (BM) for several days or have stools that are hard or difficult to pass without straining. Constipation is a common problem and the reason many people are admitted to the hospital. Even if you are not eating, regular bowel movements are still expected and we will continue to monitor for constipation.

Taking opioids (pain medicine) will make you constipated. This problem will not go away as long as you are taking opioids. Here are some things you can do to decrease constipation that is caused by taking opioids:

- Take laxatives
- Drink plenty of water
- Stay physically active

What can I do to avoid constipation?

- **Drink fluids**

Drink at least 2 quarts or 8 glasses (8-ounce size) of clear fluids each day. However, if you have been told to limit fluids, check with your doctor about how much you can drink.

- **Physical Activity**

Be sure to do some walking if you are able. Check with your doctor before starting any new exercises.

- **Use Laxatives**

You may need to take medicine every day, while you are on opioids, to control your constipation. See the following guide for how to use laxatives. Check with your doctor for other ways to control constipation.

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

Step	Medicine	Directions	
1	You should start taking one or both of these medicines the same day you start taking opioids (pain medicine).		
	Senna 8.6 mg tablets	Take 1 to 2 tablets, two times each day. If your bowels become loose, you may need to take fewer pills.	These medicines will help prevent constipation. Use laxatives every day that you take opioid pain medicine.
	Miralax (Polyethylene glycol 3350)	Mix 1 cap (17 grams) of powder in 8 ounces of water, juice, soda, sports drink, coffee or tea. Take 1 to 2 times each day.	
2	If you have not had a bowel movement in 48 hours, CALL YOUR DOCTOR. Your doctor may tell you to use one of the medicines listed below.		
	Milk of Magnesia 400mg/5mL (not concentrate)	Take 30 to 60 mL by mouth, each day or as directed by your doctor.	Use each day as needed or as directed by your doctor.
	Bisacodyl suppository 10 mg	Remove foil wrapper and insert into your rectum with pointed end first. Hold in your rectum for 15 to 20 minutes.	
3	Call your doctor again if you have not had a bowel movement for 24 hours after following these steps.		
	Do not use Docusate or over-the-counter stool softeners to treat constipation caused by taking opioid pain medicine.		

When should I call my doctor?

You should call your doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Watery stools (this can be a sign of severe constipation or too much bowel medicine)
- No bowel movement in 48 hours
- Small stools
- Hard stools
- Pain with bowel movements
- Straining with bowel movements
- A new or sudden onset of abdominal pain associated with reduced bowel movements

Special Instructions:

Names of Opioid Medicines:

- Hydrocodone (Vicodin, Norco, Lortab)
- Morphine (MSContin, MSIR)
- Oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet, OxyIR, Roxicodone, Xtampza)
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid, Exalgo)
- Fentanyl (Duragesic)
- Oxymorphone (Opana)
- Methadone
- Buprenorphine (Butrans, Belbuca, Suboxone, Subutex)