

When pain medicines cause constipation, increasing fiber and fluid intake may not be effective.

Treating Constipation Caused by Pain Medicines

Constipation is a common side effect of pain medications. This occurs more often if opioid drugs, such as morphine or hydrocodone are used. Signs of constipation are bowel movements that are difficult, painful or less frequent than is normal for you.

Other causes of constipation may include:

- Poor fluid intake
- Emotional stress
- Certain illnesses, including some cancers
- A low fiber diet
- Lack of exercise
- Failure to respond to the urge
- Medications, especially those used for pain control, nausea, or depression
- Chemotherapy treatments

General Guidelines

The following guidelines will help prevent constipation. **For most people, a bowel movement every day or every other day will prevent feelings of discomfort.**

Time

Set aside the same time each day to have a bowel movement, especially after breakfast. Respond to the urge right away. You may have to strain if you wait. **Avoid straining** if you have a heart condition.

Exercise

Exercise can reduce fatigue and improve your overall mood. As you are able, include exercise as part of your daily routine. Exercise alone will not **reverse** constipation from pain medicines.

Fiber

Fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are part of a healthy diet. They contain fiber, which may help prevent constipation. It is recommended to consume 25 to 35 grams of fiber per day. Look for foods that have at least 3 grams of fiber per serving. You can increase fiber slowly over a few weeks.

To increase your fiber intake:

- Eat fruits and vegetables with the peels and skins on
- Choose whole grain foods
- Add beans to your diet

When choosing whole grain foods, look for foods with 100% whole wheat, rye, oats or bran as the 1st or 2nd ingredient on the food nutrition label.

Prune juice also stimulates the bowel and may help with chronic constipation. Try taking 1/2 to 1 cup serving of prune juice or dried prunes each day.

The table below shows foods high in fiber. Try to include some of these items in your diet.

Food	Amount	Total Fiber (g)
Bran cereal	½ cup	8.6
Cooked kidney beans	½ cup	7.9
Cooked lentils	½ cup	7.8
Cooked black beans	½ cup	7.6
Canned chickpeas	½ cup	5.3
Baked beans	½ cup	5.1
Pear	1	5.1
Soybeans	½ cup	5.1
Quinoa	½ cup	5
Baked sweet potato, with skin	1 medium	4.8
Baked potato, with skin	1 medium	4.4
Cooked frozen green peas	½ cup	4.4
Bulgar	½ cup	4.1
Cooked frozen mixed vegetables	½ cup	4
Raspberries	½ cup	4
Blackberries	½ cup	3.8
Almonds	1 oz	3.5
Cooked spinach	½ cup	3.5
Apple	1 medium	3.3
Dried dates	5 pieces	3.3

If it becomes difficult to eat fruits and vegetables, fiber supplements (such as Metamucil®, Fibercon®, Citrucel®) may be used to prevent constipation. However, the fiber in fruits, vegetables or supplements alone will not reverse constipation caused by pain medicines.

Fluids

Drink as much fluid as you can; at least 8 to 10 glasses a day. As you get older, your body may not tell you to drink enough fluids and you may need to remind yourself to drink plenty of fluids each day. Once again, this alone will not treat constipation from pain medicines.

While the above methods may be helpful, often times they may not work well when constipation is caused by pain medicines. Your doctor, pharmacist or nurse can suggest the best way to treat the problem.

Medications and Treatments

Below is a list of medicines that may be used to treat constipation. If you have any questions about these or any other medications, please ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Warning: Do not take any laxative product if you have cramps, nausea, vomiting, or abdominal pain.

1. **Recommended First** to prevent constipation caused by pain medicines.

Stool Softener with Stimulant

Examples: Senna and docusate (Senokot-S[®], Peri-Colace[®], many generics)

Action: Softens hard stool (docusate) and stimulates bowel wall (senna).

Use: Take regularly **to prevent** constipation; start with 2 each day and increase until bowel movement occurs daily or every other day. Do not take more than 8 tablets in a 24-hour period.

2. If stools remain hard and dry after taking the softener and stimulant daily for 1 week, add the following:

Stool Softeners

Examples: Polyethylene glycol 3350 (Miralax[®])

Action: Keeps stool soft and easier to pass.

Use: Increases the amount of water in the gut, adding bulk and softening stools. Mix powder, as directed, with a liquid and drink once a day.

3. If constipation still persists after taking these medicines, consider 1 or more of the following:

Stimulant Laxatives

Examples: Bisacodyl (Dulcolax[®])

Action: Causes the bowel wall to contract which pushes stool through colon.

Use: The medicines are used when constipation needs to be quickly managed. These can be taken by mouth or rectally by suppository. Both may cause cramps and abdominal pain. Also, results may come on without warning.

Most often, the rectal route works more quickly. It is suggested if you have an upset stomach. However, if your white blood cell count or platelets are low from chemotherapy, do not use a suppository. Talk with your doctor or nurse.

Other Medicines

Examples: Lactulose[®], Golytely[®], Milk of Magnesia[®], Sorbitol[®]

Action: Keeps water in the bowel to soften stool.

Use: Results may come on without warning. May cause gas, diarrhea and cramping. Take only on the advice of your doctor.

Enema

Example: Fleets[®]

Action: Direct softening and movement of stool in the rectum. Acts quickly. Results may come on without warning.

Use: Often, an enema works more quickly. It is suggested if you have an upset stomach. However, if your white blood cell count or platelets are low from chemotherapy, do not use. Talk with your doctor or nurse.

Softening Suppository

Examples: Glycerin

Action: Softens the rectum to allow stool to be gently released. Some mild stimulation in the rectum.

Caution: If your white blood cell count or platelets are low from chemotherapy, do not use a suppository. Talk with your doctor or nurse.

Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

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Developed by: NMH Cancer Pain Program with the Departments of Pharmacy and Clinical Nutrition