

Constipation During Chemotherapy

Constipation is a common side effect of chemotherapy medications. Signs of constipation are bowel movements that are difficult, painful or less frequent than is normal for you.

If you have any questions, please ask your physician or nurse.

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 chemotherapy medicines.

Fiber

Fruits, vegetables and whole grains are part of a healthy diet. They contain fiber, which may help prevent constipation. Try to eat 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.
- Choose whole grain foods.
- Add beans to your diet.

When choosing whole grain foods, look for foods with 100 percent 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 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	1/2 cup	8.6
Cooked kidney beans	1/2 cup	7.9
Cooked lentils	1/2 cup	7.8
Cooked black beans	1/2 cup	7.6
Canned chickpeas	1/2 cup	5.3
Baked beans	1/2 cup	5.1
Pear	1 medium	5.1
Soybeans	1/2 cup	5.1
Quinoa	1/2 cup	5
Baked sweet potato, with skin	1 medium	4.8
Baked potato, with skin	1 medium	4.4
Cooked frozen green peas	1/2 cup	4.4
Bulgar	1/2 cup	4.1
Cooked frozen mixed vegetables	1/2 cup	4
Raspberries	1/2 cup	4
Blackberries	1/2 cup	3.8
Almonds	1 ounce	3.5
Cooked spinach	1/2 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 chemotherapy 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 chemotherapy medicines.

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

Over-the-counter medications

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

To prevent or relieve mild constipation

You may take one of these medications just before starting chemotherapy.

Colace® (docusate)

Action: Keeps stool soft and easier to pass.

Use: Take 1 to 2 capsules by mouth once a day.

Take this stool softener with a full glass of water. It may take 1 to 3 days of regular use for this medicine to take effect.

Miralax® (polyethylene glycol 3350)

Action: Holds water in the stool to soften the stool and increase the number of bowel movements.

Use: Take once a day. Use no more than 7 days. To use the powder, follow these steps:

1. If you are using polyethylene glycol 3350 from a bottle, use the measuring line on the bottle cap to measure a single dose (about 1 heaping tablespoon). If you are using polyethylene glycol 3350 packets, each packet contains a single dose.
2. Pour the powder into a cup containing 8 ounces (240 milliliters) of water, juice, soda, coffee or tea.
3. Stir to dissolve the powder.
4. Drink it right away. The drink thickens as it sets over time.

It may take 2 to 4 days for polyethylene glycol 3350 to produce a bowel movement.

Senokot® (senna)

Action: Keeps stool soft and easier to pass.

Use: Take 1 to 2 tablets by mouth up to 4 times per day.

Take stimulant laxatives on an empty stomach with a full 8-ounce (240 mL) glass of water. Results occur more slowly if the medicine is taken with food. Most stimulant laxatives are taken at bedtime, with results by morning. However, some products may take up to 24 hours to produce a bowel movement.

As another option, you can try Smooth Move® tea, which contains senna. This is available in most grocery stores.

This also comes as Senna-S® which contains docusate, a stool softener.

For severe constipation

If you have constipation that is not relieved by the above medications, call your physician. If advised, follow the instructions below:

Ducolax® (bisacodyl) suppository or pill

Action: Causes the bowel wall to contract and push stool through the bowel.

Use: You may use this medicine when constipation needs to be quickly managed.

These can be taken by mouth as pills or rectally as a suppository. Both may cause cramps and abdominal pain. Results may come on without warning.

To use the suppository, follow these instructions:

1. Remove the wrapper.
2. Put on a disposable glove or cover your index finger with a plastic sandwich bag.
3. Dip the tip of the suppository in lukewarm water.
4. Lie down on your left side and raise your right knee to your chest. (A left-handed person should lie on the right side and raise the left knee.)
5. Using your index finger, insert the suppository high into your rectum. Clench your buttocks together to hold it in place for a few moments. Try to keep it there for as long as possible.
6. Wash your hands thoroughly.

Most often, the rectal route works more quickly and is preferred 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 physician or nurse.

Mineral oil

Action: Hold water in the bowel to swell and soften the stool. This stimulates the normal forward movement of the bowels (peristalsis), which usually results in a bowel movement within 6 to 8 hours. The lubrication also eases stool passage.

Use: Start with 1 teaspoon per day and increase to 2 to 3 tablespoons per day as needed.

Take mineral oil on an empty stomach, preferably first thing in the morning. Mineral oil does not have a very pleasant taste, so be prepared to brush your teeth right after you take it. It may also cause cramping.

Mineral oil will block the absorption of vitamins, nutrients and medications. Please let your medical team know if you find that you have to take mineral oil.

Call your team at the Northwestern Medicine Lou and Jean Malnati Brain Tumor Institute if these tips do not resolve your constipation.

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.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363 or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

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