

Cancer & Constipation or Difficulty Moving Your Bowels

Constipation and diarrhea are often experienced by people with cancer. When you are constipated, you may have fewer bowel movements than what is normal for you. Your bowel movements may be hard or dry, and more difficult to pass. When your platelet counts are low (thrombocytopenia), constipation may increase your risk of rectal bleeding. You may notice blood in the toilet after you move your bowels.

Changes in bowel function can be caused by changes to the way your body functions due to disease, medications, dehydration, or changes in daily habits and activities. It is important to treat constipation for your comfort and quality of life.

The goal is to have a least one bowel movement every three days.



Medications that can cause constipation include:

- Chemotherapy
- Pain medications, including Morphine, Vicodin®, Oxycodone®, OxyContin®, Percocet®, Fentanyl®, Dilaudid®, and Methadone
- Anti-nausea medications, including Ondansetron/Zofran® and Palonosetron/Aloxi®

Methods to reduce constipation:

- Drink prune or apple juice.
- Eat fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods to increase your fiber intake.
 - Fruits: dried prunes, apricots, raisins
 - Vegetables: raw or cooked broccoli, green beans, spinach, leafy green salads
 - Breads and grains: bran muffins or cereal, brown rice, whole-wheat bread
 - Nuts and seeds: Walnuts, popcorn, sunflower seeds
- Engage in moderate exercise (e.g., walk around the block) for 15-30 minutes daily to help move bowels.
- Drink water (e.g., at least 8 glasses daily) to help prevent dehydration, which can increase constipation.
- Ask your nurse about food combinations that can help move bowels.

Medications to treat constipation:

- Take laxatives as needed for regular bowel movements. If you develop diarrhea, stop taking laxatives until bowel function returns to normal. You may be prescribed these medications, many of which are available over the counter at your pharmacy:
 - Senna/Senokot® (laxative in tablet form)
 - Bisacodyl/Dulcolax® (laxative in tablet form)
 - Polyethylene glycol/Miralax® (laxative in liquid form)

- Magnesium hydroxide/Milk of Magnesia® (laxative in liquid form)

Call your doctor if you experience:

- Pain in your stomach.
- Fever.
- Unable to pass gas.
- Nausea or vomiting with your constipation.
- No bowel movement within 3 days after taking laxatives as recommended.
- Swelling of your stomach, or if it feels hard to the touch.

Visit our website for more information about support groups, clinical trials and lifestyle information.

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NOTE: This information is provided to you as an educational service of National Jewish Health. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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