

Constipation: managing different causes

Constipation is the passing of hard, dry bowel movements (faeces/stools). They may be hard to pass or you may go less often than usual. It can cause:

- Pain, bloating, discomfort
- Flatulence
- Tiredness
- Poor appetite
- Nausea
- Bowel obstruction or blockage – a build up of faeces/stools; this can also be with the passing of loose watery stools

How do I know if my bowel movements are regular enough?

Everyone's bowels motions are different...

- Even if you are eating less food than usual – you should still have regular bowel movements
- Aim for a soft bowel movement, easy to pass, every 1-2 days
- Monitor your bowels by keeping a diary. Record the type of bowel movement and how often each day

If you have not had a bowel movement for 3 days or more, contact your Nurse or Doctor.

Medical causes of constipation

Constipation can be due to:

- Certain diseases e.g. colorectal cancer, metastatic abdominal cancer
- Other medications you take e.g.
 - Strong pain relief
 - Codeine (e.g. *Panadeine*)
 - Oxycodone (e.g. *Endone*, *Oxycontin*, *Oxynorm*)
 - Morphine (e.g. *Ordine*, *MS contin*)
 - Anti-nausea drugs
 - Ondansetron (e.g. *Zofran*)
 - Anti-depressants
 - Chemotherapy drugs

Management

Changing your diet is not usually helpful for medical causes of constipation.

Key recommendations are:

- drink plenty of fluids
- take regular laxative medication as prescribed (e.g. *Movicol*, *Coloxyl and Senna*)

Check with your Doctor, Nurse or Pharmacist before starting laxatives.

Your Doctor or Nurse may recommend starting regular laxatives to help prevent or treat constipation. Especially if you are on chemotherapy, strong pain relief, or other medications known to cause constipation.

Other common causes of constipation

- Older age
- Poor fluid intake
- Poor fibre intake
- Less food
- Reduced exercise/mobility
- Hospitalisation

Tips to help manage these common causes of constipation:

- Drink plenty of fluids. Aim for at least 2 litres (6-8 glasses) each day
- Light exercise such as walking
- Increase fibre intake *slowly*. Good sources include wholegrain breads and cereals, fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds.
- Drink pear or prune juice

Always check with your Dietitian or Doctor first to see if increasing fibre is best for **your** constipation. Your Dietitian can provide more help on high fibre diets if needed.

BE AWARE....

Increasing fibre too quickly or starting bran or fibre supplements (e.g. Metamucil or Psyllium husk) without drinking enough fluids can make constipation worse. It can cause bloating, flatulence, discomfort and pain.

Other reasons for constipation are:

Bowel obstruction or blockage (e.g. caused by cancer or surgical complications)

BE AWARE....

Some cancers will cause patients to be at risk of a bowel blockage known as a bowel obstruction. **If your diagnosis makes you high risk of an obstruction please seek advice from your Doctor and Dietitian before changing your diet.** Your Dietitian can provide more help on the best diet for you.

Key references:

- Melinda M Carmen et al; Emergent Management of Constipation in Cancer Patients, Journal of Emergency Medicine November 2011
- PEN resource: Cancer and Constipation
- Woolery et al; Putting Evidence into Practice: Evidenced- Based Interventions for the Prevention and Management of Constipation in Patients with Cancer, Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing, 2008, Volume 12 Number 2.