

Preventing Constipation

Emptying the large bowel (colon) on a regular schedule will keep stool soft and prevent constipation. It is very important to have bowel movements regularly while you are receiving cancer treatment. If you are constipated, your stool can become hard which may cause bleeding. **Do not use** enemas and suppositories if your platelet or white blood cell counts are low or if you are taking blood thinners. The following instructions will help you to:

- have regular bowel movements;
- set goals for expecting bowel movements; and
- take over-the-counter medicine correctly to prevent constipation.

Regular Bowel Movements

- The best thing you can do to manage constipation is drink plenty of fluids and include fiber in your diet, unless you are on a low fiber diet:
 - Drink 2 quarts (eight, 8-ounce glasses) of non-alcoholic fluids each day. Half of the fluids you take in each day should be non-caffeinated.
 - To prevent constipation, eat 1 cup of General Mills Fiber One® cereal with fruit. Eating high-fiber cereal will help you meet the 25-40 grams of fiber that you need daily (unless you are on a low fiber diet). If you are not used to eating fiber, start off slowly:
 - Eat ¼ cup Fiber One each day for the first week.
 - Eat ½ cup Fiber One each day for the second week.
 - Eat ¾ cup Fiber One each day for the third week.
 - Eat 1 cup Fiber One each day for the remaining time needed.
- You may need to take medicinal fiber (for example, Metamucil® or Citrucel®) as prescribed by your nurse or dietitian. Ask your nurse for a copy “Medicinal Fiber.” However, **do not take** medicinal fiber if:
 - you cannot drink large amounts of fluids;
 - you have a history of bowel obstructions; or
 - you are taking chemotherapy that affects the gastrointestinal (GI) tract.
- Include foods in your diet that help you have a bowel movement, such as prunes, prune juice and hot liquids.
- Take medicine as prescribed by your doctor or nurse. Some medicines cause constipation. Your doctor may advise you to take other medicines to help relieve the constipation.
- Daily physical activity helps keep the digestive system active. Talk to your doctor about how much physical activity is best for you.

- When you feel the urge to have a bowel movement try to get to a bathroom right away, don't wait. It is helpful to sit upright on the toilet. If your feet don't reach the floor while you are sitting on the toilet, support them with a footstool.

Setting Goals for Frequency of Bowel Movements

- The frequency of bowel movements varies with each person. As described below, your frequency of bowel movements is affected by your food intake.
 - If you eat your regular amount of food per day, expect to have a bowel movement every day.
 - If you eat one-half your regular amount of food, expect to have a bowel movement every other day.
 - If you eat one-third your regular amount of food, expect to have a bowel movement every third day.
- If you do not have a bowel movement by 4 p.m. on the day you expect, drink 4 ounces of prune juice at room temperature, then immediately drink a hot liquid. If you do not have a bowel movement by bedtime, take 2 tablespoons or 2 caplets of milk of magnesia with 8 ounces of water. If you do not have a bowel movement after breakfast the next day, repeat the dose of milk of magnesia. If you have kidney problems, ask your doctor before you take milk of magnesia.
- Timing of bowel movements can be important. Work towards having a bowel movement after the same meal every day. Drinking a hot liquid after that meal will increase the “push down” effect of stool in your GI tract.
- Call your nurse or doctor if:
 - you go three days without having a bowel movement; **or**
 - your stool is hard and difficult to pass.

Over-the-Counter Medicines to Prevent Constipation

Pain medicine, some chemotherapy drugs and other medicines can cause severe constipation by slowing down movement of stool in the bowel. When stool moves slowly in the bowel, it loses water, becomes hard and can be difficult to pass. Refer to the list on page 3 for other medicines that cause constipation.

When you begin taking a constipating medicine, immediately begin to take a stool softener and a stimulant laxative daily. These will counteract the constipating effects of the medicines. The stimulant laxative moves the stool down in the intestines, and the stool softener helps keep water in the colon.

You can safely take up to eight Senokot-S[®] pills per day. Senokot-S in generic form is one 8.6 milligram dose of sennoside (senna) (also known as a stimulant laxative or vegetable laxative), and one 50 milligram dose of docusate sodium (a stool softener). Both senna and docusate sodium are non-prescription laxatives that can be purchased in pharmacies and most drug stores. If you need help finding these medicines, ask the pharmacist. Start with two doses

per day, or as directed by your doctor or nurse. For example, take 1 Senokot-S twice a day, **or** 1 senna and 1 docusate sodium twice a day. Gradually increase the dosage until you have soft-formed stools on a regular basis; however, **do not** take more than 500 milligrams of docusate sodium (stool softener) per day.

Ask your nurse or doctor about the possible side effects of your medicines, including over-the-counter medicines.

A Partial Listing of Medicines That Cause Constipation

- Aluminum antacids with calcium
- Anti-inflammatories
- Antihistamines
- Calcium channel blockers
- Parkinson's disease medicines
- Iron
- Muscle relaxants
- Opioid pain medicine
- Some anti-emetics (ie. ondansetron/Zofran[®])
- Diuretics (water pills)
- Neuroleptics
- Tricyclic antidepressants

Points to Remember

- Know the possible side effects that medicines and cancer treatment may cause on your GI tract. Your nurse can give you information on your chemotherapy.
- It is important to prevent constipation rather than treating it after it happens.

Contact your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you have problems or questions.