

Constipation: Managing With Nutrition

Constipation is the infrequent or difficult passing of a hard, dry stool (body waste). Constipation in cancer patients can be caused by the location of the tumor, cancer treatment, side effects of pain medicine or not eating or drinking enough food and/or liquids. Following the guidelines below can help relieve constipation and regulate bowel function.

Increase Fiber

Fiber is the indigestible substance in plant foods that promotes regular bowel movements. Fiber helps you have bowel movements by absorbing water, decreasing the amount of time stool is in the colon and adding bulk to the stool. This makes stools softer and easier to pass. Include 25-40 grams of fiber in your diet each day. A gradual increase fiber in your diet will help decrease the amount of gas, bloating and abdominal cramps that fiber can cause. Before you increase your intake of fiber, make sure you are drinking the amount of fluids that your dietitian recommends. See the bottom of Page 2 about how to contact your dietitian.

Tips for increasing fiber in your diet:

- Eat dry cereals that have at least 9 grams of fiber per serving. Some examples are Kellogg's Raisin Bran[®], All Bran[®], General Mills Fiber One[®], and Kashi Go Lean Crunch[®].
- Use whole wheat flour.
- Eat whole grains such as brown rice, wild rice or barley instead of white rice and potatoes. Eat whole wheat pasta, as well as whole wheat or corn tortillas.
- Sprinkle wheat germ, bran, Kashi Go Lean Crunch or Fiber One on top of your favorite cereal, or add it in yogurt, casseroles or baked products.
- Eat beans and legumes. One-half cup of beans provides 6 or more grams of fiber.
- Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables daily, especially those with skin or seeds (such as: apples, oranges, pears, squash, tomatoes, spinach, berries).
- Smart snack choices include raw fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds or popcorn.
- Eat breads made with 100 percent whole grains (wheat, rye and oats). Look for breads that also include nuts, seeds or bran for additional fiber.
- Some fiber bars do not contain whole grains. Read the ingredients list on the package.
- Be aware that products containing inulin (also called chicory root powder) may cause you to have more gas. Read the ingredients list on the package.

Timing of Meals and Fluids

To help stimulate bowel movements: 1) eat meals at about the same time each day; 2) drink 4 ounces of prune juice at the beginning of a meal; and 3) drink a hot beverage at the end of a

meal.

Drink at least eight to 10 glasses, 8-ounce size each, of non-alcoholic fluid each day. Caffeinated beverages should make up no more than 50 percent of your total daily fluid intake. Fluids include:

- Water. To make a habit of drinking more water, carry it when you travel, keep it at your desk at work or near your chair while watching TV.
- Juices, sports drinks, milk and nutrition supplements.
- Any food that becomes liquid at room temperature, such as gelatin, popsicles, ice cream or soup.
- Drink 4 ounces of prune juice at room temperature and then drink a hot liquid. This will help bring on a bowel movement.

Exercise

Regular moderate exercise (as tolerated), such as walking, can strengthen and stimulate the muscles that help move food and stool through the digestive system.

Consult Your Health Care Team If:

- You are unable to have a bowel movement or pass gas for more than three days.
- You have abdominal pain, cramping, nausea or vomiting associated with no bowel movements.
- You feel that you need help having regular bowel movements.

Additional Information

- Medicinal fiber (such as Metamucil[®] or Citrucel[®]) is needed if you do not get 25-40 grams of fiber in your diet. Talk to your nurse or dietitian for instructions on how to take these.
- Watch the video, “Understanding and Managing Your Bowel Function.” This video can be viewed several ways:

Option 1: View Through myMDAnderson

1. Log on to myMDAnderson at <https://mymdanderson.org/>.
2. At the top, move your cursor to the Resources tab. A dropdown list should appear.
3. In the dropdown list, click “Video Library.”
4. Under “Video Titles,” select “Understanding and Managing Your Bowel Function.”

Option 2: View With Video on Demand

1. Press **Menu** on the nurse call/TV remote to see the Main Menu.
2. Select **Patient Ed Videos**.
3. Press the Number Keys to enter the video’s ID number: **115**.

For more information or to schedule a nutrition consultation, please call the Department of Clinical Nutrition at 713-563-5167.