

This information looks at managing constipation, diarrhoea and flatulence (wind).

What is constipation?

Constipation is a stopping or slowing down of how often you pass a bowel motion (poo). It can also be passing small, hard bowel motions with difficulty. Constipation may cause stomach cramps, nausea, a swollen stomach, and wind. Sometimes there may be fluid leaking from your bottom (like diarrhoea). This could be due to leaking around a blocked bowel motion.

Several factors may cause constipation, for example:

- not drinking enough fluids
- lack of fibre (wholegrain breads, fruits and vegetables)
- lack of exercise
- some medications, for example some pain-relievers and chemotherapy can cause constipation
- some cancers.

It is important that the causes of your constipation are correctly diagnosed. Contact your GP if you are having any problems with your bowel.

If you have any nausea, vomiting or severe abdominal cramps, if there is bleeding from your bottom or on the toilet paper after a bowel movement, contact your GP immediately. Haemorrhoids (piles) or a split in the skin can cause fresh bleeding from the anal area and may be due to straining to pass a bowel motion. Tell your GP if this is happening.

Preventing constipation

- Eat fresh and dried fruits. Dates, prunes, figs and apricots can be helpful. Drink prune juice (try it warmed).

- Slowly increase the amount of fibre (roughage) in your diet. Good sources of fibre include whole grain cereals and breads, brown rice, fresh fruit (kiwifruit and prunes are particularly helpful) and vegetables with skins on.
- If eating more fibre, it's important to drink more fluid too.

Eat regular meals with high-fibre snacks between. Try some of this prune mix daily:

- 1 cup pureed apple
- 1 cup bran flakes
- 1/2 cup softened prunes
- 1 cup prune juice

Puree all together using a food processor or blender and eat two to three tablespoons with breakfast daily.

- Use Kiwicrush (you can buy it from the frozen fruit section of your local supermarket).
- Make sure you drink plenty of liquid if you can. Aim to drink 8 cups of fluid every day (eg water, milk, soup and hot drinks).
- Drink caffeine in moderation or not at all.
- Get enough rest and eat at regular times in a relaxed atmosphere.
- Exercise as you are able. Even short walks will help with constipation.
- When you start any new medication or chemotherapy, check with your doctor if you need to take a laxative with it. A laxative is a medication that can soften your bowel motions and make it easier to go to the toilet. For most people who are taking an opioid, such as codeine or morphine, it will be necessary to take a laxative.

There are different types of laxatives and treatments to help with constipation

Treating constipation

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It is not advisable to take any over-the-counter laxatives or enemas without firstly discussing this with your treatment team. They will prescribe the one most suited to you.

If you are currently having chemotherapy, enemas and suppositories may need to be avoided as there is a potential risk of infection. Discuss this option with your treatment team first.

What is diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea is loose or liquid bowel motions that may come with stomach cramps, bloating, frequency or urgency (needing to go more often and having to get to the toilet quickly). People being treated for cancer may experience diarrhoea for a number of reasons:

- some medications (for example, antibiotics and some chemotherapy medications)
- changes in what you eat
- stomach /bowel infections caused by viruses, bacteria or protozoa
- some cancers
- some surgical procedures.

Chemotherapy or radiation treatment may affect your bowels, talk to your doctor or dietician for more information and advice.

Treating diarrhoea

It is important that the reasons for your diarrhoea are correctly diagnosed. Contact your treatment team for advice.

If you are having chemotherapy you need to make contact with your oncology department if you have diarrhoea. Do not take laxatives with diarrhoea.

DO NOT take any over-the-counter medications to treat diarrhoea without consulting your pharmacist or treatment team.

- Ongoing diarrhoea can cause dehydration, so drink plenty of fluids to replace the water lost with the diarrhoea.
- Avoid drinks high in sugar as they can make diarrhoea worse (eg fruit juice and cola).
- While you have diarrhoea it is best to cut down on your fibre intake from fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.
- Avoid highly spiced foods and fizzy drinks. These can cause wind and stomach cramps.
- Eat frequent, small meals made from light, plain, non-fatty foods, such as white fish, poultry, eggs, (well cooked), white bread, pasta or rice. Eat your meals slowly.
- Have fruit stewed or tinned rather than dried or fresh.
- If your diarrhoea is due to infection, your GP will prescribe the right medication. For other causes, they can prescribe diarrhoea relieving medications. Commonly used medicines include Lomotil, Imodium (Loperamide), Diastop and codeine phosphate. It is important to take medication as prescribed and tell your treatment team if it does not work.

If you have ongoing problems with diarrhoea and are worried about leakage, talk to your nurse about the use of specially designed pants and pads.

What is flatulence (wind)?

Flatulence is excess wind or gas in the stomach and bowel, ongoing and lasting bloating or belching, or passing wind. People being treated for cancer may experience wind for a number of reasons:

- changes in what you eat
- constipation • exercising less
- sometimes it is due to the cancer itself, for example, some cancers of the stomach and bowel
- the type of surgery you may have had to treat your cancer.

Treating wind

It is important that the reasons for your wind are correctly diagnosed - talk to your doctor or nurse. The following tips may help:

- Eat and drink slowly. Take small mouthfuls and chew your food well.

- Avoid food that you think gives you wind. Beans, cabbage, onions and garlic may cause problems.
- Gentle exercise, especially walking, can be helpful.
- Drink peppermint tea. If you like, flavour it with lemon juice..
- If you still have problems with wind, talk to your doctor.

