

Constipation

Key Points

- Causes: Some chemo and opioid medications, low fiber diet, lack of exercise, hormone or electrolyte imbalance, not drinking enough water, and overusing laxatives.
- Eating fiber rich foods, staying hydrated, and increasing physical activity may help.
- There are many types of laxatives. Talk to your doctor about what's best for you.

Constipation is hard, dry stool that is hard to pass and/or going to the bathroom less often than normal (for you). Constipation occurs when the colon (bowel) takes too much water out of the stool. This happens when stool moves through the colon too slowly or when the colon absorbs water faster than normal. About half of all people with cancer have constipation. Common causes include:

- Cancer or cancer treatment that creates blocks the intestine, puts pressure on the nerves controlling the colon; or damages the cells lining the digestive tract.
- Medications for nausea or seizures, pain (opioids), vinca alkaloid chemo drugs such as vincristine/Oncovin®, vinblastine/ Velbe®, and vinorelbine/Navelbine®.
- Not enough physical activity, fiber in the diet, water (dehydration), or food.
- Heavy or long term use of laxatives.
- Hormonal imbalances that change your metabolism such as low thyroid hormone levels.
- Electrolyte imbalances such as high levels of iron, calcium, or potassium.
- Depression.

Symptoms

- Feeling full/bloated, cramps, belly pain, gas, loss of appetite, no bowel movements for 2+ days, straining to go, feeling pressure in your rectum, nausea, or anal leaking* that looks like diarrhea.
* Stool that moves around a large amount of stool stuck in colon/rectum (impaction).




Prevention – The Better Option

- ✓ **Eat more fiber.** Fiber draws water into the stool and softens it. Add fiber to your diet *slowly* to avoid gas and bloating – 5 grams a day if OK with your doctor.
- ✓ **Eat and cook with foods that are natural laxatives** such as seeds, raisins, prunes, prune juice, bran, papaya, and fibrous vegetables (sweet potatoes, pumpkin, spinach, kale).
- ✓ **Have a prevention plan.** If taking opioid medication, ask about a bowel routine to prevent constipation. Opioids slow down the colon and cause constipation.

- ✓ **Drink 2-3 quarts (liters) per day, particularly water** to stay hydrated and keep the fiber moving through your colon. Hot drinks (cocoa, tea, hot water with lemon) can help stimulate the colon. Try to have a hot beverage and a high fiber food at breakfast.
- ✓ **Increase physical activity.** Even a short walk can help get your intestines moving. Always check with your doctor before starting any new activity.



Foods to Help with Constipation

Breads and grains	Fruits and vegetables	Snacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bran or whole-grain cereals • Brown or wild rice • Cooked, dried peas and beans (such as pinto, black, or kidney beans) • Whole wheat bread or pasta 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dried fruit, such as apricots, dates, prunes, and raisins • Fresh fruit, such as apples, blueberries, and grapes • Raw or cooked vegetables such as broccoli, corn, peas, green beans, and spinach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Granola • Nuts • Popcorn • Seeds, such as sunflower 

Over-the-Counter Laxatives

- **Check with your healthcare team before using any of these products.**
- Do not use laxatives for more than 1 week without your doctor's approval.
- Laxatives can interfere with other medicines. Take other medicines 2 hours before or after a laxative. If you are not sure if your medicines might interact, ask your pharmacist.

Laxative Type	How it Works	Products
Stool softeners	Increases water & fat in the colon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • docusate/Colace®
Stimulants	Increases the colon's contractions and moves stool through colon faster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bisacodyl/Correctol®, Dulcolax® • sennosides/Senokot®, Ex-Lax®
Bulk forming (fiber supplements)	Moves through the colon quickly, taking stool with it. Only works if you drink a lot of water!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • psyllium/Metamucil® • methylcellulose/Citrucel® • polycarbophil/FiberCon®
Osmotic preparations	Pulls water into the colon. Your doctor may combine an osmotic laxative with a stimulant laxative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • magnesium hydroxide/Milk of Magnesia® • polyethylene glycol/Miralax® • sorbitol, magnesium citrate, lactulose, and glycerin suppositories
Lubricants	Keeps water in the colon (softens) & makes stools oily (easier to pass)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fleet® Mineral Oil Enema, mineral oil