

Constipation and Diarrhoea Information for Patients

Constipation: Constipation is a very common problem. It means either passing hard or painful bowel motions or going to the toilet less often than usual to empty your bowels. Everyone has a different bowel habit, so constipation is an individual thing. Remember, if you are eating less, this does not necessarily mean you will pass bowel motions less. If you become uncomfortable or are at all concerned, please don't leave it too long to seek advice as the earlier the detection the easier it is to help.

Constipation is a common problem in people with cancer and other chronic diseases. It can cause pain and discomfort for many, and if not managed, can also cause nausea and vomiting, overflow like diarrhoea, difficulty passing urine and a bowel blockage.

Diarrhoea: means more than 2 loose or watery motions per day. As for constipation, any concerns or questions please don't leave it too long to seek advice.

It is most important to replace lost fluid otherwise you may become dehydrated.

There are many possible causes for bowel problems:

- Effects of the cancer and/or other disease
- Poor food/fluid intake
- Reduced mobility or lack of exercise
- Ignoring the urge to pass a bowel motion
- Medication
- Environmental factors such as the lack of toilet facilities/privacy

Treatments may include:

- Ensuring toilet access and privacy
- Your ability to get to the toilet when required
- Dietary advice
- Regular assessment by your nurse or doctor
- Regular monitoring of your bowel motions
- Laxative therapy: this is almost always necessary when taking opioid medication, e.g. morphine

Tips for Constipation:

- If possible eat regular meals, eat and drink slowly and chew food well.
- Try to get more fibre: have cereals with bran or use whole meal breads or fibre white bread
- Eat raw and cooked fruits and vegetables daily
- Kiwifruit, prunes, figs can be especially helpful
- Try to get more fluid, if possible drink 6-8 glasses of fluid a day (e.g. water, tea, fruit or milk drinks, soup, jelly, ice blocks).
- If able increase activity.

Tips for Diarrhoea:

- Start by drinking clear fluids e.g. water, strained soup, flat fizzy drink, black tea, sports drink or 'Gastrolyte'.
- You may initially need to avoid dairy products, alcohol, greasy foods, highly spiced food, fruits or vegetables with pips, seeds or tough skins
- Then try to eat soft bland foods e.g. try crackers, toast, plain rice, boiled potatoes, ripe banana, stewed apple.
- Then gradually return to your normal diet (initially try mashed potato, rice pudding, eggs, baked fish/chicken, yoghurt, custard).

Helpful Hint 1:

Your nurse/doctor will want to know your bowel action details each time they visit; therefore it is a good idea to write it down in a book.

Helpful hint 2:

*Your bowels do not need to move everyday but **if your bowels have not moved for 3 days and/or you are in any discomfort and/or if diarrhea appears after a period of constipation then – PLEASE INFORM YOUR DOCTOR OR NURSE***

This is a general guide only, not a complete resource on the subject. It has been prepared for patients and families who are receiving palliative care.

If you have further questions, ask your health care professional.