



CANCERcare®

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COPING WITH CONSTIPATION

Defined as fewer than three bowel movements a week (although fewer than four or five may be a reduced number for some people), constipation is a common side effect during cancer treatment. It's important to address any side effects you experience with your health care team. Treating side effects is an important part of comprehensive cancer care—managing symptoms will make it easier for you to stick with your treatment plan.

CAUSES OF CONSTIPATION

There are many reasons an individual would experience constipation:

- Certain chemotherapy drugs
- Physical inactivity
- Dehydration
- Fiber lacking in the diet
- Certain over-the-counter medications

In cases of severe constipation, liquid can seep around a blockage, which some people mistake for diarrhea. This may prompt them to take an anti-diarrheal medication, making the problem worse.

SYMPTOMS OF CONSTIPATION

Talk to your health care team if you experience constipation, in addition to any other side effects you experience. Talk to your doctor if you experience any of the following:

- Pain and cramping
- Loss of appetite
- Swelling in the abdomen area
- Nausea and vomiting
- Difficulty urinating



PREVENTING AND AVOIDING CONSTIPATION

Talk to your health care team about which options are best for you to avoid constipation. Here are some things you can do on your own:

- Eat plenty of dietary fiber. Grains, beans and vegetables such as cauliflower and broccoli are good sources of fiber.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids. Avoid alcohol which can cause dehydration.
- Talk to your health care team about incorporating exercise in your daily routine.

Keep a side effect journal. Keeping details of the side effects that you experience will help your health care team. Having a health care journal or notebook will allow you to keep all of your health information in one place. If you are experiencing constipation, it may be helpful to keep a journal detailing:

- Your diet
- Fluid intake and type of fluid
- Medications you're currently taking
- Any physical activities
- The frequency of stools

It can be helpful to have this journal with you when you talk with your health care team.

TREATING CONSTIPATION

If you think you are experiencing constipation, talk to your health care team about options for you. The best thing to do is to prevent constipation through diet, exercise and careful use of laxatives. For some people, prescription pain medicines can be one of the biggest reasons people with cancer experience constipation. But your health care team can prescribe a special schedule of laxatives along with your pain medication so that you can still benefit from pain relief and avoid constipation.

GET HELP: YOUR DOCTOR IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

The physical and emotional effects of cancer and treatment can be significant. Talking to a certified dietitian or nutritionist throughout treatment may be helpful. Nutritional needs during treatment vary from person to person. A dietitian or nutritionist can personalize your eating and hydration needs to reduce constipation. For more information on nutrition during treatment, read CancerCare's fact sheet titled 'The Importance of Nutrition During Treatment.'

Oncology social workers can also help by providing emotional and practical support for people with cancer and their loved ones professional oncology social workers help anyone affect by cancer, free of charge. To speak to a CancerCare professional oncology social worker, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).

CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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