

CANCER AND CONSTIPATION



People with cancer can often experience constipation.

WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

Constipation is the passing of hard, dry bowel movements (faeces/stools). They may be hard to pass or you may go less often than usual. Constipation can cause:

- Pain, bloating, discomfort
- Flatulence
- Tiredness
- Poor appetite
- Nausea
- Bowel obstruction or blockage – a build-up of faeces/stools; this can include the passing of loose watery stools

MONITOR YOUR BOWEL MOVEMENTS

Even if you are eating less food than usual, you should still have regular bowel movements.

- Aim for a soft bowel movement that is easy to pass, every one to two days

Monitor your bowels by keeping a diary. Record the type of bowel movement and how often each day.

If you have not had a bowel movement for three days or more, you may wish to contact your nurse or doctor and consider booking an appointment with a dietitian.

MEDICAL CAUSES OF CONSTIPATION

Cancer patients, particularly those with colorectal or metastatic abdominal cancer, can be more susceptible to constipation.

In addition, certain medications can cause constipation, for example: strong pain relief (codeine, Endone®, Oxycontin®, morphine, Ordine®, MS contin®), anti-nausea drugs (Ondansetron®/Zofran®), anti-depressants or chemotherapy drugs.

Your doctor or nurse may recommend regular laxatives to help prevent or treat constipation. Changing your diet is not usually helpful for medical causes of constipation.

CABRINI CANCER EXERCISE AND WELLNESS CENTRE

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OTHER CAUSES OF CONSTIPATION

- Older age
- Poor fluid intake or dehydration
- Poor fibre intake
- Less food
- Reduced exercise/mobility
- Hospitalisation

How to prevent constipation

- Maintain good hydration – drink plenty of fluids. Aim for at least two litres (six to eight glasses) of water per day.
- Keep active and perform light exercise regularly
- Incorporate fibre-rich foods in your diet. Increase fibre intake slowly. Good sources include wholegrain breads and cereals, fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds.
- Drink pear or prune juice

Always check with your dietitian or doctor before increasing your fibre – they will advise if this is recommended for your personal circumstances. Your dietitian can provide more information about high-fibre diets if needed.

Increasing fibre too quickly or starting bran or fibre supplements (e.g. Metamucil® or psyllium husk) without drinking enough fluids can make constipation worse. It can also cause bloating, flatulence, discomfort and pain.

BOWEL BLOCKAGE

Some cancers or treatments can cause patients to be at risk of a bowel blockage known as a bowel obstruction. If you have any queries or concerns about your bowel habits, please consult a member of your treating team.

WHEN TO SEEK ADVICE

You should seek advice if you:

- Notice significant change in your bowel habits
- Feel bloated or uncomfortable
- Think you may need medications to assist opening your bowels
- Are feeling otherwise concerned

WHO TO CONTACT FOR ADVICE

- **Symptom and Urgent Review Clinic (SURC):**
Monday to Friday 8.30am – 4pm.
Please call the clinic on (03) 9508 1944 for advice.
- To make an appointment to see a **dietitian**, contact Cabrini Access on (03) 9508 1700 or email: access@cabrini.com.au
- Alternatively contact your GP or treating specialist
- For urgent assistance, go to your closest emergency department