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Blocked Intestine or Gastrointestinal Obstruction [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 02/2014

Gastrointestinal (GI) obstructions are most common for people with ovarian or colorectal cancers, but people with cancers of the stomach, uterus, prostate, bladder, or other cancers also may experience this side effect. Usually, the intestines move food and fluids through the GI tract (including the stomach, intestines, and bowel), and enzymes, fluids, and electrolytes help the body absorb nutrients during this process. In a person with a GI obstruction, the food and fluids can't move through the system, and the normal contractions that the intestines make to move the food, called peristalsis, can cause intense pain. A GI obstruction is a serious and even life-threatening problem if it is not treated.

People with a GI obstruction may experience the following symptoms:

- [Nausea and vomiting](#) [3], sometimes the vomit may contain food, drinks, or medications that were taken in more than several hours before the vomiting
- Pain from the obstruction that may feel better after vomiting
- Cramping from the movement of the intestine as it tries to move food along
- Inability to have a bowel movement or pass gas, despite an urge to do so

Relieving side effects, also called symptom management, [palliative care](#) [4], or supportive care, is an important part of cancer care and treatment. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you may experience, including any new symptoms or a change in symptoms.

Treatment

The treatment of a GI obstruction depends on the cause. GI obstructions are often treated with surgery to clear a path for the food to continue through the GI tract. Sometimes, a GI obstruction is caused by stool (feces) that has become hard and difficult to pass. Enemas and other options to loosen and/or soften the stool can relieve these types of GI obstructions. If the obstruction is caused by twisting of bowel that can be reversed, your health care team will recommend that you rest the GI tract by not eating or drinking and instead receive intravenous (IV, through a vein) feedings for a few days to make sure you stay hydrated.

In people who cannot have surgery, other procedures may help relieve the symptoms caused by a GI obstruction:

- Delivering fluids through an IV tube
- Using a nasogastric tube (a tube that is inserted through the nose down to the stomach) to remove the contents of the stomach and prevent further pain
- Placing a stent (an expandable tube) into the site of the obstruction to help food move more easily through the GI tract

In addition, your doctor may give you medication to address nausea and vomiting, [diarrhea](#) [5], inflammation, or pain.

More Information

[The Importance of Hydration](#) [6]

[Side Effects](#) [7]

Additional Resource

[National Cancer Institute: Gastrointestinal Complications](#) [8]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/blocked-intestine-or-gastrointestinal-obstruction>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25052>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25282>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25247>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24702>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25238>

[8] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/gastrointestinalcomplications/Patient/page3>