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[Blocked Intestine or Gastrointestinal Obstruction](#) [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 02/2016

A gastrointestinal (GI) obstruction is when something is blocking a person's GI tract. The GI tract is made up of the stomach, intestines, and bowel. During the usual process of digestion, food and fluids move through the GI tract. Enzymes, fluids, and electrolytes help the body absorb nutrients during this process. When a person has a GI obstruction, the food and fluids can't move through the system as usual. Also, the intestinal contractions that 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.

GI obstructions are most common for people with the following cancers:

- Ovarian cancer
- Colorectal cancer

People with other cancers may also develop this side effect, including:

- Stomach cancer
- Uterine cancer

- Prostate cancer
- Bladder cancer

Causes of a GI obstruction

Below is a list of some of the causes of a GI obstruction:

- Stool (feces) that has become hard and difficult to pass
- Twisting of the bowel
- Scar tissue in the bowel
- A tumor

Symptoms of a GI obstruction

People with a GI obstruction may experience the following symptoms:

- Nausea
- Vomiting that may contain food, drinks, or medications taken more than several hours before the vomiting
- Pain that may feel better after vomiting
- Cramping from the movement of the intestine as it tries to move food along
- Not being able to have a bowel movement or pass gas, despite needing to

Relieving side effects is an important part of cancer care and treatment. This is called symptom management or [palliative care](#) [3]. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you may experience. This includes any new symptoms or a change in symptoms.

Treating a GI obstruction

The treatment of a GI obstruction depends on the cause. Below are some of the ways to treat or manage a GI obstruction.

- Enemas and other options to loosen and/or soften the stool for a blockage caused by hard stool.
- Receiving intravenous (IV, through a vein) feedings instead of eating or drink for a few days. This can help rest a bowel to help reverse a twisted bowel.
- Surgery to clear a path for the food to continue through the GI tract.

If you cannot have surgery, other methods may help relieve the symptoms caused by a GI obstruction:

- Receiving fluids through an IV tube.
- Using a nasogastric tube to remove the contents of the stomach and prevent further pain. A nasogastric tube is inserted through the nose down to the stomach.
- Placing an expandable tube called a stent into the site of the blockage.

Your doctor may also give you medication to relieve [nausea and vomiting](#) [4], [diarrhea](#) [5], inflammation, or [pain](#) [6].

More Information

[Types of Cancer](#) [7]

[Dehydration](#) [8]

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Additional Resource

National Cancer Institute: [Gastrointestinal Complications](#) [10]

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/25282>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25052>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25247>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24585>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31521>
- [9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25238>
- [10] <http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/constipation/gi-complications-pdq>