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Constipation [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 01/2016

Constipation occurs when a person has a feeling of needing to move the bowels but can't. It starts when the body absorbs more water or signals food to move through the bowels more slowly. Constipation is a common but controllable symptom for people with cancer.

Symptoms of constipation

In addition to not being able to empty the bowels, people with constipation may experience the following symptoms:

- Pain and cramping
- Swelling in the abdomen
- Appetite loss
- Nausea and vomiting
- Inability to urinate
- Confusion

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

You can often control these symptoms by taking some simple steps. However, these symptoms are sometimes a sign of a more serious problem that means you need more tests.

Causes of constipation

Common causes of constipation include:

- Not eating enough food or fiber
- Not drinking enough water or other fluids
- Not exercising

For people with cancer, the following factors might also cause constipation:

- Medicines, including the following:
 - Pain medicines, which can slow the muscular action of the bowel that helps food move through the system
 - Some drugs that treat nausea and vomiting, seizures, depression, diarrhea, or blood pressure
 - Iron supplements
 - Chemotherapy
- Scar tissue from surgery or cancer growing in the bowel, which causes narrowing or partial bowel obstruction
- A tumor or scar tissue completely blocking the bowel, called [bowel obstruction](#) [4]

- Being physically inactive
- Cancer pressing on the spinal cord
- High levels of calcium in the blood
- Low potassium levels
- Thyroid problems
- Diabetes

Diagnosing constipation

If you have constipation, your doctor may recommend a rectal examination or an x-ray or other imaging scans. This is to make sure you don't have a tumor blocking your rectum or GI tract. These tests also help find out whether there is hard stool in your rectum.

Your doctor may also ask you about the following:

- Your bowel habits, before the cancer and now
- Use of medicines that may cause constipation
- What you've been eating and drinking recently
- Other diseases or illnesses

Managing constipation

It is very important to treat constipation properly. Without treatment, constipation may cause internal damage to the intestine or rectum, dehydration, or bowel obstruction. It can also slow the body's absorption of medicines taken by mouth. If there is scar tissue or a tumor causing the problem, you may need to have more tests.

Talk with your health care team about the best way to manage constipation. Some of the

following suggestions may help.

- Drink more liquids.
- With the advice of the health care team, ask about changing the dose or stopping medicines that cause constipation.
- Eat more fiber or take fiber supplements. However, if you have scar tissue or a tumor narrowing your bowel, your doctor may recommend a low-fiber diet. This is because the fiber may back up behind the narrower areas of the bowel. A low-fiber diet is also called a low-residue diet.
- Increase physical activity, if possible.
- Ask your health care team about treatment, such as laxatives, an enema, or rectal suppository. Some of these may be harmful for some patients.

More Information

[Dehydration](#) [5]

[Side Effects](#) [6]

Additional Resource

National Cancer Institute: [Gastrointestinal Complications](#) [7]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/constipation>

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

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

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25244>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31521>

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

[7] <http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/constipation/gi-complications-pdq#section/all>