Constipation After Your Operation

Why it happens and what you can do

This handout explains why it is common to become constipated after surgery, and offers helpful tips to decrease constipation.

What is constipation?

Constipation is when your bowels move less often and your stools are more firm. Symptoms include abdominal discomfort, bloating, swelling, and having to strain when having a bowel movement.

It is common to become constipated after having surgery. This can cause discomfort until you get back to your regular schedule.

What causes constipation after surgery?

Your digestion may work more slowly and you can get constipated when:

- There are changes in your usual eating habits
- You are taking prescription pain medicines
- You are not as active as usual

Tips to Decrease Constipation

- **Take the stool softener** that your doctor prescribed. This is usually docusate (Colace).

- **Increase how much liquid you drink.** This helps keep your stools soft. Drink 6 to 8 glasses (8 ounces each) of water every day. This is besides the other liquids you drink with your meals.

You are not drinking enough if:

- The amount that you urinate is less than normal
- Your urine is dark-colored and strong-smelling
- You feel dizzy when you stand up

Please call to talk with a nurse if you have any questions or concerns about your self-care at home.
- **Eat foods that are high in fiber.** The easiest way to get fiber is by eating breakfast cereal. Look for brands with 5 grams or more fiber per serving. Fiber content is listed with the nutrition information on the side of the cereal box. Some high-fiber cereals include Spoon Size Shredded Wheat, All-Bran, and Oat Bran.

These foods are also high in fiber: dry and unsalted peanuts, whole wheat bread, other whole-grain products, parsnips, grapefruit, cantaloupe, cooked carrots, prunes, peas, baked beans, kidney and other beans, lentils, and split peas.

- **Try to have meals, especially breakfast, at the same time each day.** This helps get your bowels back on a regular schedule.

- **If your doctor says it is OK for you to drink coffee, have some at breakfast.** Coffee helps move your bowels. Decaf coffee works, too.

- **Drink prune juice** (cold or warm) at breakfast.

- **Walk or do other exercise after breakfast** to help food move through your intestines.

- **If you feel the urge, try to go.** Most people feel the urge to have a bowel movement about 20 minutes after a meal.

- **Do not just sit on the toilet and read.** Sitting on the toilet for a long time can cause painful swelling or hemorrhoids. Wait until you feel the urge to have a bowel movement, then sit on the toilet.

### Laxatives

Sometimes after an operation, a laxative can help your bowels start to move. You can buy these medicines without a prescription (“over the counter”) at any drugstore:

- **Milk of Magnesia liquid:** Works overnight.
- **Biscodyl rectal suppositories:** Work in about 20 minutes.
- **Fleets enema:** Works in about 15 minutes.

If you have used a different laxative before and it worked well, ask your nurse if it’s a good idea to use it again.

### When to Call

Call one of the numbers in the “Questions” box at left if you:

- Are having a lot fewer bowel movements than what is normal for you
- Are sick to your stomach and throwing up
- Feel dizzy or lightheaded when you stand up

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**Questions?**

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

On weekdays, call:

- **UWMC Surgical Specialties Center**, 206.598.4477 (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.)
- **UWMC 8-Southeast Oncology Unit**, 206.598.8300 (8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.)
- **UW Sports Medicine Center at Husky Stadium**, 206.598.DAWG (3294) and press 8

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the resident on call for Surgery to be paged.

Or, ask for your doctor to be paged: