UW Medicine
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Constipation During Treatment

Why it happens and what you can do

What is constipation?

When stools move very slowly through your bowels, it is called *constipation*. The stools are often hard to pass. They may be hard or dry.

Constipation may not get better on its own. If it is not treated, it can even get worse.

Many patients have constipation during their treatment. Please feel free to call your doctor or nurse to talk about constipation.



Many patients have constipation during their treatment. Please talk with your doctor or nurse if you have this problem.

What causes constipation?

Constipation can be caused by chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, stress, or other medicines you are taking. This is why we prescribe bowel medicines when you start treatment.

If you are on chemotherapy and have not had a bowel movement in 2 days, tell your nurse.

Why did I get a prescription for 2 bowel medicines?

Bowel medicines have different strengths. You will use a medicine based on whether your constipation is mild, moderate, or severe.

What can I do to help avoid constipation?

- **Fluids:** Drink 8 to 10 glasses of fluid a day. Avoid caffeine, which can cause dehydration. This can cause or increase constipation.
- **Smooth Move Tea**: You can find this tea in many grocery stores. It may help relieve constipation. Drink 1 cup of this tea 2 times a day until you have a bowel movement. (Do **not** take senna pills at the same time.)

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- **Exercise every day.** Even a 30-minute walk can help move your bowels. Taking a walk after meals is often most helpful.
- **Eat dried or cooked prunes.** Do this 1 to 2 times a day.
- **Drink prune juice.** If you are already constipated, try drinking ½ cup of prune juice.
- **Eat more high-fiber foods.** Do this **only** when you are able to drink plenty of fluids. If you do not drink fluids, eating more fiber may make constipation worse. High-fiber foods include whole wheat breads, cereals, crackers, wheat bran, bran muffins, pinto and kidney beans, peas, fresh fruit and vegetables, oats, barley, brown rice, and dried fruits like figs and prunes.

Constipation Medicines

We will give you prescriptions for medicines to help ease constipation. There are also "over-the-counter" medicines you may want to try. You can buy these medicines in your local drugstore without a prescription. **Talk with your doctor before you take any over-the-counter remedies.**

To help bowel medicines work best, drink lots of fluids while you are taking them.

Senna *For mild constipation*	Senna is an herb. It is often used as a mild laxative. It comes in a pill form or as a tea. It is one of the ingredients of Smooth Move Tea. You can take senna morning or night, with or without food.
Miralax *For moderate constipation*	You can take Miralax morning or night, with or without food. It is a powder that you mix with juice or water. This is a stronger laxative.
Rectal suppositories *For severe constipation*	If your constipation is severe, your provider may advise a rectal suppository. This is a capsule you insert into your rectum. It works quickly because the medicine is absorbed directly into your bloodstream.
Enemas *For severe constipation*	If your constipation is severe, your provider may advise doing an enema. To do an enema, you inject liquid into your rectum.

Questions?

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

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