

Managing Constipation During Chemotherapy

This handout explains how chemotherapy can cause constipation. You will learn about different treatment options, tips for preventing constipation, and when to call the clinic for help.

Constipation During Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can often cause constipation. Some medicines used to prevent nausea can also slow down your bowels and dry out your intestines. This can lead to:

- Hard *stools* (poop)
- Trouble having a *bowel movement* (pooping)
- Belly bloating or pain
- Nausea and vomiting
- Heartburn or reflux
- Feeling very uncomfortable

If you recently had surgery, constipation can become an even bigger problem. The best way to prevent this is to start a daily bowel plan early and stay on it during chemotherapy.

Diet Tips

Drink Plenty of Fluids: Fluids are very important to help prevent constipation. Drink plenty of water every day. It can also help to have drinks with electrolytes, such as Pedialyte or Gatorade.

Eat Fiber if You Can: Fiber can help keep your bowels moving.

- During chemotherapy, high-fiber foods may be hard to tolerate. Do the best you can.
- Fiber supplements are okay to use if they do not cause too much gas or stomach discomfort.

Daily Medicine to Help Prevent Constipation

Miralax

If possible, start taking Miralax (Polyethylene Glycol) before chemotherapy begins, or as soon as you can. The usual starting dose is 1 capful every day. You can change the dose if needed:

- You can **increase** your dose up to 1 or 2 capfuls, 1-2 times each day.
- You can **decrease** to ½ capful each day or every other day.
- Ask your provider if you have any questions about your Miralax dose.

Do not “start and stop” Miralax: It is important to note that Miralax is **not** a “quick fix” laxative. It is meant to be taken **regularly** to prevent constipation. It may take a few days to start working, and it can keep working for a few days after you stop taking it.



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Other Medicines You Can Use

You may try one of the following over-the-counter medicines if constipation continues. Read and follow the instructions that come with each medication.

- Senna tablets: 2–4 tablets daily
- Milk of Magnesia: 1–2 capfuls daily
- Dulcolax tablets: 2–4 tablets daily
- Dulcolax or glycerin suppositories: 1–2 times daily
- Magnesium citrate (drinkable solution): ½ to 1 bottle daily
- Correctol, Ex-Lax, or other over-the-counter bowel medicines

Sometimes you may need **both** *oral medicine* (taken by mouth) and a *rectal medicine* (such as a suppository). Using both can help move the bowels from both ends of the intestines.

For Your Safety

- Always talk with your care team if you have questions about your medicines or how much to take.
- Tell your care team which bowel medicines you are taking, including over-the-counter medicines and supplements.
- Some medicines may take time to work. If one medicine is not helping after a day or two, you may need to add or change medicines based on your care team's instructions.

When to Call Your Care Team

Call the clinic right away if:

- You have tried several bowel medicines and still cannot have a bowel movement
- You are not passing gas
- You have ongoing nausea or vomiting

The clinic can give you more instructions and help prevent more serious problems.

Questions?

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