

Managing Constipation

For patients with cancer: “mush, push, gush”

What is constipation?

When someone has problems passing stool, it is called constipation. Signs of constipation include:

- Hard, dry stool, like “rabbit pellets”
- Pain or straining while trying to pass stool (may cause hemorrhoids)
- Bloating and fullness, or even nausea and vomiting

Even if you are not eating much, it is important to have small bowel movements regularly. Your goal is:

- Soft, formed stool that passes easily
- Bowel movement every day or 2

Why is constipation a problem for cancer patients?

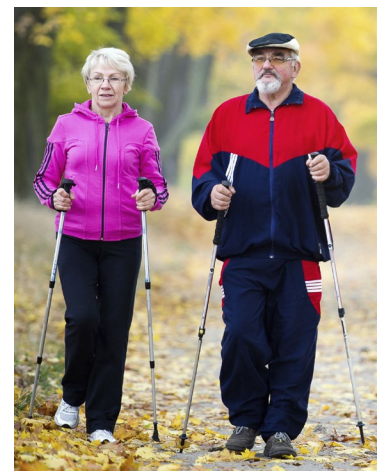
When someone has advanced cancer, they may have problems with their bowels. Causes of this include:

- Medicines such as opioids and ondansetron (Zofran)
- Dehydration (not enough water in the body tissues)
- A lack of exercise
- Tumors in the belly
- *Carcinomatosis* (small “beads” of cancer inside the bowel that block stool)
- Other issues that may show up in lab tests

What can I do?

Here are some things you can do to help avoid constipation:

- **Exercise:** Moving your body helps your bowels start moving. Try to walk for 5 to 15 minutes once or twice day. Even slow walks will help.



Even gentle exercise can help you avoid constipation.

- **Fluids:** Dehydration makes constipation worse. Drinking fluids regularly helps the bowels move. Try to drink at least 2 liters of fluid each day, if you can.
- **Prunes or prune juice:** Eating 6 prunes or drinking 6 oz. of prune juice a day can work wonders!

What is “mush, push, gush?”

Most patients need to take 2 or 3 bowel medicines during treatment. These must be taken as prescribed.

- *Mush* is our word for stool softeners. Use one of these products when you have stool that is hard or like rabbit pellets.
 - **Docusate 250 mg:** Take 1 capsule once or twice a day. You may increase to 2 capsules twice a day, if needed.
 - **Senna-S:** This pill contains both senna and docusate. But, it has only 50 mg docusate, which may not be enough to soften your stool.
- *Push* is our word for *stimulant* laxatives. These products help your intestines move stool. They can cause cramping and diarrhea.
 - **Senna:** Take 1 to 2 tablets at bedtime (8.6 mg each). You may increase to 2 tablets twice a day, if needed.
 - **Senna tea:** “Smooth Move” and other brands. Drink 1 cup of tea twice a day.
 - **Bisacodyl (Dulcolax):** Take 1 to 2 tablets (5 mg each) at bedtime. You may increase to 2 tablets twice a day, if needed.
- *Gush* is our word for an *osmotic* laxative. These products pull water back into the colon to soften stool.
 - **Polyethylene glycol (MiraLAX).** Take 17 grams (1 scoop or capful) in juice once a day. You may take up to 2 times a day, if needed. You can buy this at a drugstore without a prescription.
 - **Lactulose:** Take 30 cc (2 tablespoons) 1 to 4 times a day.

Can I take a fiber supplement?

We do **not** advise taking fiber supplements such as Metamucil or Citrucel. They can make constipation worse if you have advanced cancer. This is because you must have a very high fluid intake when you take fiber supplements.

Other Products to Help with Constipation

Yakima Fruit Paste

Ingredients:

4 oz. senna tea leaves or tea bags

1 pound each: pitted prunes, raisins, and figs

1 cup brown sugar

1 cup lemon juice

Instructions:

1. Prepare tea, using about 2 ½ cups boiling water added to tea. Steep for 5 minutes.
2. Strain tea to remove tea leaves.
3. Add only 2 cups of the tea to a large pot. Add fruit.
4. Boil fruit and tea for 5 minutes.
5. Remove from heat. Add sugar and lemon juice. Let cool.
6. Use a hand mixer or food processor to blend the mixture into a smooth paste.
7. Spoon into a plastic container and place the container in the freezer. The paste will not freeze, but it will keep a long time without spoiling in the freezer.
8. Spoon out the amount you need each day.

How to Use

Eat 1 to 2 tablespoons a day. You can use this paste in 2 ways:

- Eat with a spoon, or spread on toast, bread, crackers, or bagels.
- Add hot water and make a drink.

Severe Constipation

If you have severe constipation that does not ease with the treatments given in this handout, talk with your care team. You may be able to use one of the measures listed below.

But, severe constipation may be caused by a partial or total bowel *obstruction* (stoppage). This issue needs emergency assessment and treatment.

- **If you have severe constipation that does not ease in 24 to 48 hours:** Call your nurse right away.

- **If you have severe belly pain:** Call the 24-hour on-call line or go to the nearest emergency room.

Treating Severe Constipation

- **Bisacodyl (Dulcolax) 10 mg suppository:** Use 1 in your rectum each night. Do NOT take with senna tablets or bisacodyl tablets. This product causes cramping.
- **Magnesium citrate:** Take ½ to 1 bottle. Repeat if no bowel movement within 12 hours. Do not take more than 2 doses without calling your care team for more instructions. You can buy this at your local drugstore without a prescription.
- **Milk of Magnesia:** Take 1 tablespoon 2 to 4 times a day. Do not take more than 2 days in a row without calling your nurse for more instructions. You can buy this at your local drugstore without a prescription.
- **Fleets enema:** Follow instructions inside the package. Do **not** do more than 2 enemas without calling your nurse for more instructions. You can buy this at your local drugstore without a prescription.
- **Methylnaltrexone (Relistor) subcutaneous shot:** This medicine is by prescription only. An 8 mg or 12 mg shot is given every 24 to 49 hours for severe constipation caused by opioids.

Questions?

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

Radiation Oncology:
206.598.3100, weekdays from
8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

After hours and on weekends
and holidays, call
206.598.6190 and ask for the
Radiation Oncologist on call.