

# Constipation, Diarrhoea and Flatulence

## Practical Tips



This Information Sheet looks at what constipation, diarrhoea and flatulence (wind) are and ways to treat them.

### Constipation – What is it?

Constipation is a decrease in frequency of bowel movements and/or passing small, hard bowel motions with difficulty. Constipation may also cause stomach cramps, nausea, a swollen stomach, and wind. Sometimes there may be fluid leaking from the bottom (like diarrhoea). This could be due to leaking around a blocked bowel motion.

Several factors may contribute to the development of constipation, for example:

- reduced food and fluid intake.
- reduced physical activity.
- some drugs, especially pain-relievers and some chemotherapy can cause constipation.
- sometimes the cancer itself, especially cancers in the stomach and bowel: this can be treated very effectively.

### What can I do to prevent constipation?

- Increase the amount of fibre (roughage) in your diet.
- Good sources of fibre include whole-wheat breakfast cereals, wholemeal bread and flour, brown rice, wholemeal pasta, fresh fruit, especially kiwifruit, and vegetables with skins on.
- Dried fruits, especially dates, prunes, figs and apricots can be helpful. Drink prune juice (try it warmed).

- Try some of this prune mix daily:
  - 1 cup pureed apple
  - 1 cup bran flakes
  - 1/2 cup softened prunes
  - 1 cup prune juice

Puree all together using a food processor or blender and serve 2-3 tablespoons with breakfast daily.

- Make sure you drink plenty of fluids.
- Try to drink nutritional fluids, e.g. milkshakes and soups rather than always choosing water, since liquids can be filling and may decrease your appetite.
- Get enough rest and eat at regular times in a relaxed atmosphere.
- Increase physical activity as much as you are able. Even short walks will help minimise constipation.
- When you start any new medication or chemotherapy, check with your doctor if you need to take a laxative with it.

For most people who are taking an opioid, such as morphine to relieve pain, it will be necessary to take a laxative, i.e. a drug which relieves constipation regularly.

### How is constipation treated?

It is important that the causes of your constipation are correctly diagnosed. Contact your doctor or oncology nurse if you have not had a normal bowel motion or they have changed or been less frequent.

If you have any nausea, vomiting or severe abdominal cramps, if there is heavy bleeding from your bottom or on the toilet paper after a bowel movement, contact your doctor immediately. They will diagnose the cause and suggest treatment.

Haemorrhoids (piles) or a split in the skin can cause fresh bleeding from the anal area and may be due to straining to pass a bowel motion. Report this to your doctor.

**It is not advisable to take any over-the-counter laxatives or enemas without contacting your doctor or oncology nurse.**

If changing your diet or increasing activity are not possible or doesn't work, your doctor can prescribe a laxative.

There are different types:

- ones that add bulk, e.g. Metamucil, etc.
- ones that stimulate bowel movements, e.g. Senakot, etc.
- Some laxatives combine a stimulant and softening effect, e.g. Coloxyl and Senna.
- Lactulose (duphalac) draws fluid into bowel contents to bulk and soften.

For constipation that does not respond to the previously suggested treatments, there are suppositories (drugs inserted into the bottom and absorbed through the wall) that can lubricate and or stimulate the bowel, e.g. Dulcolax.

Another way of treating severe or persistent constipation is to use an enema (a small bag of fluid containing a laxative). The contents of the bag are warmed and gently inserted into the bottom via a tube attached to the bag. Commonly used enemas are Microlax and Fleet. Alternatively, your doctor or oncology nurse may recommend a glycerine and milk enema.

If you are prescribed a laxative, report to your doctor or oncology nurse if it is not effective, i.e. if there is no bowel movement within one day of taking the laxative.

## Diarrhoea – What is it?

Diarrhoea is loose or liquid bowel motions and may be accompanied with stomach cramps, bloating, frequency or urgency. People being treated for cancer may experience diarrhoea for a number of reasons which are:

- some medications, e.g. antibiotics and some chemotherapy drugs, e.g. 5 Flurouracil (5FU), Capecitabine (Xeloda).
- dietary changes, such as increasing fibre can cause diarrhoea in some people.
- gastrointestinal infections caused by viruses, bacteria or protozoa.
- sometimes the cancer itself, especially cancers of the stomach or bowel can cause diarrhoea.
- diarrhoea may be the result of some surgical procedures e.g. surgery to the bowel.

During a course of radiation therapy to the bowel or chemotherapy many people are unable to tolerate cow's milk. Cramping pains and diarrhoea can result if lactose (milk sugar) is not digested. Mild cheese and yoghurt are very low in lactose and are tolerated, but cow's milk should be substituted with a soya bean milk (e.g. So-Good, Nice n Healthy soya milk, or nutritionally complete lactose-free drinks such as Ensure, or Sustacal). All are suitable for drinking and cooking. You will be able to digest lactose again after diarrhoea has completely cleared, and milk can be reintroduced then. (See the Cancer Society's booklet *Eating Well/Kia te Pai Kai* for more details or talk to the oncology dietician).

## How is diarrhoea treated?

Firstly, it is important that the reasons for your diarrhoea are correctly diagnosed. Contact your doctor or oncology nurse if diarrhoea persists for 48 hours.

**DO NOT take any over-the-counter medications to treat diarrhoea without consulting your doctor or oncology nurse.**

- While you have diarrhoea it is best to cut down on your fibre intake from fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.
- Persistent diarrhoea can cause dehydration, so ensure you drink plenty of fluids to replace the water lost with the diarrhoea. Aim to drink at least 8 cups (1500ml) of fluid per day. Avoid alcohol and coffee. Limit your intake of milk and milk-containing drinks.
- Drink liquids warm or at room temperature. Hot and cold liquids tend to increase muscle contractions and make diarrhoea worse.
- Avoid highly spiced foods and fizzy drinks – these can cause wind and stomach cramps.
- Eat frequent, small meals made from light, bland, non-fatty foods such as white fish, poultry, eggs, (well cooked), white bread, pasta or rice. Eat your meals slowly.
- Have fruit stewed or tinned rather than dried or fresh.
- If your diarrhoea is due to infection, your doctor will prescribe the appropriate medication. For other causes they can prescribe diarrhoea-relieving drugs. Commonly used drugs include Lomotil, Imodium (Loperamide) and Codeine phosphate. It is important to take medication as prescribed and to report to your doctor or nurse if it is ineffective.

If you have ongoing problems with diarrhoea and are worried about leakage, talk to your oncology nurse about the use of specially designed pants and pads.

## Flatulence – What is it?

Flatulence is the presence of excess wind or gas in the stomach and bowel, persistent bloating or belching, or breaking wind. People being treated

for cancer may experience flatulence for a number of reasons:

- dietary changes
- constipation
- reduced activity
- sometimes it is due to the cancer itself, e.g. some cancers of the stomach and bowel.

## How is flatulence treated?

- **Firstly, it is important that the reasons for your flatulence are correctly diagnosed – talk to your doctor or oncology nurse.**
- Eat and drink slowly. Take small mouthfuls and chew your food well.
- Avoid food that you think gives you wind. Particularly troublesome can be nuts, cucumber, milk, sausage meat, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, fizzy drinks, peppers, pickles, legumes, oat bran, soybeans and highly spiced foods.
- Treat constipation if present – consult your doctor or oncology nurse.
- Gentle exercise, especially walking, can produce some relief.
- Try two teaspoons full of peppermint water dissolved in a small cup of hot water. If you like, sweeten it with a teaspoonful of sugar (source: Cancer BACKUP. UK).
- Charcoal tablets available from your chemist may be helpful. They should not be taken long-term as they can interfere with absorption of nutrients – check with your doctor.
- If symptoms of flatulence are persistent, talk to your doctor.