

Constipation, Diarrhoea and Flatulence



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

Constipation – What is it?

Constipation is a stopping or slowing down of how often you pass a bowel motion. It can also be 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:

- eating and drinking less than usual.
- less exercise than usual.
- some medications, especially pain-relievers and some chemotherapy can cause constipation.
- sometimes the cancer itself, especially cancers in the stomach and bowel.

It is important that the causes of your constipation are correctly diagnosed. Contact your doctor or 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. Tell your doctor if this is happening.

Preventing 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 to 3 tablespoons with breakfast daily.

- Use Kiwicrush (you can buy it from the supermarket).
- Make sure you drink plenty of fluids.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine in them.
- Try to drink nutritional fluids, for example, milkshakes and soups rather than always choosing water, since liquids can be filling and may lessen your appetite.
- Get enough rest and eat at regular times in a relaxed atmosphere.
- Increase exercise as much as you are able. Even short walks will help with constipation.
- When you start any new medication or chemotherapy, check with your doctor if you need to take a laxative with it. A laxative is a medication that can soften your bowel motions and make it easier to pass.

For most people who are taking an opioid, such as morphine to relieve pain, it will be necessary to take a laxative.

DO NOT take any over-the-counter laxatives or enemas without contacting your nurse or doctor.

Treating constipation

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, for example, Metamucil, benefiber, Macilax, Isogel, Granocol and Normcol.
- ones that stimulate bowel movements, for example, Senakot or Bisacodyl.
- ones that soften bowel motion, for example, Coloxyl, Senna and Docusate.
- ones that retain water or draw water into the bowel which softens the motion, for example, Lactulose and Movicol.

Your doctor or nurse may suggest a suppository. A suppository is small, smooth, made of wax and contains a laxative medication. This is inserted into your back passage where the wax melts and releases the medication. There are suppositories that can lubricate and/or stimulate the bowel, for example, Dulcolax or glycerol.

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.

If you are prescribed a laxative, tell your doctor or nurse if it is not effective, for example, 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 come with stomach cramps, bloating, frequency or urgency (needing to go more often and having to get to the toilet quickly). People being treated for cancer may experience diarrhoea for a number of reasons:

- some medications, for example, antibiotics and some chemotherapy drugs, such as 5 Flurouracil (5FU), Capecitabine (Xeloda).
- changes in what you eat, 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, for example, surgery to the bowel.

During a course of radiation treatment 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 shouldn't cause problems, but cow's milk should be replaced with a soya bean milk such as So-Good, Nice n Healthy soya milk, or lactose-free drinks, such as Ensure, or Sustacal. All are suitable for drinking and cooking.

You will be able to digest lactose again after the 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 dietitian).

Treating diarrhoea

It is important that the reasons for your diarrhoea are correctly diagnosed. Contact your doctor or nurse if diarrhoea lasts for 48 hours.

If a person is having chemotherapy they need to make contact with their oncology department if they have more than six bowel movements in any 24 hours, or more than four if they are very runny or large motions.

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

- While you have diarrhoea it is best to cut down on your fibre intake from fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.
- Ongoing diarrhoea can cause dehydration, so ensure you drink plenty of fluids to replace the water lost with the diarrhoea. Aim to drink plenty of fluid each 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 right medication. For other causes they can prescribe diarrhoea-relieving medications. Commonly used drugs include Lomotil, Imodium (Loperamide), Diastop and codeine phosphate. It is important to take medication as prescribed and tell your doctor or nurse if does not work.

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

Flatulence – What is it?

Flatulence is excess wind or gas in the stomach and bowel, ongoing and lasting bloating or belching, or passing wind. People being treated for cancer may experience flatulence for a number of reasons:

- changes in what you eat
- constipation
- less exercise
- sometimes it is due to the cancer itself, for example, some cancers of the stomach and bowel
- the type of surgery you may have had to treat your cancer.

Treating flatulence

It is important that the reasons for your flatulence are correctly diagnosed – talk to your doctor or nurse.

The following tips may help:

- Eat and drink slowly. Take small mouthfuls and chew your food well.
- Avoid food that you think gives you wind. Nuts, cucumber, milk, sausage meat, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, fizzy drinks, peppers, pickles, legumes, oat bran, soybeans and highly spiced foods may cause problems.
- Treat constipation if present – talk to your doctor or nurse.
- Gentle exercise, especially walking, can be helpful.
- Drink peppermint tea. If you like, sweeten it with a teaspoonful of sugar.
- Charcoal tablets which are available from your chemist may be helpful. They should not be taken long-term as they can interfere with absorption of nutrients.
- If you still have flatulence talk to your doctor.