

Cancer and Constipation



Symptom Management



Bowel movements are different for everyone. Some people have 1 or 2 movements daily, while others may be less often. It is important that you know what is normal for you. Even if you are eating very little, you should still have small and regular bowel movements.

What is constipation?

Constipation means either:

- having less bowel movements than you usually do
- or bowel movements that are difficult or painful because the stool is hard and dry

What causes constipation?

- Taking certain pain medications
- Taking other medications used with your cancer treatments
- Other factors

What can I do to help prevent constipation?

- Increase your fluids to 8 to 10 cups (2 L - 2.5 L) of non-caffeinated fluids each day
- Increase the amount of fibre in your diet: eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains
- Keep moving and stay active
- Stop using all bulk forming laxatives. These are fibre supplements such as Metamucil®. You should stop taking these as soon as you start any other laxatives.

Many cancer patients need to take medication to help keep their bowels moving regularly.



We recommend you start a bowel routine to help prevent constipation.

There are different types of bowel routines. Here are 2 bowel routines that we recommend:

1. **Sennosides** such as Senokot® or other generic versions (see page 4)
2. **Lactulose** (which has many generic versions such as Apo-Lactulose®), or **PolyethyleneGlycol 3350 powder (PEG)** such as Relaxa®, Lax-a-Day®, or others (see page 5)

Sennosides

Sennosides is a stool stimulant, also called a stool pusher. It helps to push the stool along and out of the bowel. You can buy sennosides at your local pharmacy without a prescription. It will take a minimum of 6 to 8 hours before it will start to work.

How much sennoside should I take?

1. Take 1 sennoside pill in the morning. Wait 12 hours and take 1 pill in the evening.
2. If you are still constipated after 48 hours, take 2 pills, in the morning. Wait 12 hours and take 2 pills in the evening.
3. If this is still not working, increase the dose to a maximum of 3 pills. Take 3 pills in the morning, wait 12 hours and take 3 pills in the evening.
4. If you are having 3 times more bowel movements than you usually do, decrease the number of sennoside pills you take by 1 or 2 pills. Take 1 or 2 pills in the morning. Wait 12 hours and take 1 or 2 pills in the evening.

Note: If you use the liquid form of sennosides,
1 pill = 1 teaspoonful (tsp)

If you have not had any relief, please contact your health care team for more suggestions.

Lactulose or PEG

Your health care provider may decide to add another laxative to your routine such as **Lactulose** or **Polyethylene Glycol 3350 powder (PEG)**. You can buy these laxatives at your local pharmacy without a prescription. These work by drawing water into the intestines and increasing bowel movements. It will take about 2 to 4 days before they will start to work.

How much Lactulose should I take?

You will usually start at 15 to 30 mL (1-2 TBSPs), once or twice daily. It can be increased up to 4 times daily. It may cause gas or cramping when you first start it.

How much PEG should I take?

This is a powder you can mix into liquid. Mix 17 grams (1 heaping TBSP or capful) in 1 cup of water, juice, soda, tea, or coffee and drink once everyday. Your doctor may increase the dose if you need it.

Does it matter when I take the PEG or Lactulose?

Talk to your pharmacist about the timing of these products with your other medications.

What do I do if I start having diarrhea?

If you have emptied your bowels of constipated stool and you start to have diarrhea, **stop taking** the bowel routine medication.

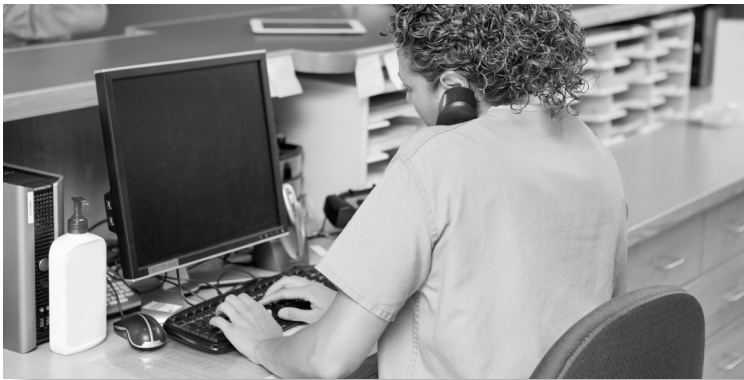
How do I know if I'm still constipated?

You are still constipated if you have one or more of the following:

- No bowel movements for 3 days
- Feeling full or bloated
- A painful urge to pass stool with no or poor results
- Stomach cramps or pain in your abdomen
- Nausea, with or without vomiting
- Watery diarrhea with little or no solids in it

What do I do if I have tried these bowel routines and I'm still constipated?

Call the phone number(s) on page 7 or your family doctor.



Talk to a healthcare provider right away if you have:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Nausea with vomiting
- Blood in your bowel movements
- No bowel movement for 5 days
- Not been passing gas
- Small amounts of liquid stool with abdominal bloating, gas pain, nausea, and/or vomiting

Do not try to treat the problem on your own

Contact Information Alberta Cancer Centres:

Calgary	Telephone Triage Nurse 8:00 am – 4:00 pm 403-521-3735 or Toll Free 1-866-238-3735 4:00 pm – 8:00 am Call 403-944-1110 and ask for the oncologist on call
Edmonton	Telephone Triage Nurse 8:30am – 4pm 780-432-8919 or Toll Free 1-877-707-4848 HealthLink 4:00pm – 8:30am call 811

Contact Information Alberta Cancer Centres:

Barrhead	7:45am – 4pm 780-305-3304	After hours call: 811
Bonnyville	8:00am – 4:00pm 780-826-6533	
Camrose	8:00am – 4:00pm 780-679-2822	
Canmore (Bow Valley)	8:00am – 4:30pm 403-493-4867 403-679-7313	
Drayton Valley	7:30am – 3:45pm 780-621-4888	
Drumheller	8:00am – 3:30pm 403-820-7985	
Fort McMurray	8:00am – 4:00pm 780-791-6217	
Grande Prairie	8:00am – 4:00pm 780-538-7588	
High River	8:00am – 4:30pm 403-652-0139	
Hinton	8:15am – 4:30pm 780-817-5009	
Lethbridge	8:00am – 4:15pm 403-388-6800	
Lloydminster	8:00am – 4:00pm 306-820-6144	
Medicine Hat	8:00am – 4:00pm 403-529-8817	
Peace River	8:00am – 4:00pm 780-624-7593	
Red Deer	8:00am – 4:30pm 403-343-4526	