



Constipation is having difficulty opening your bowels or passing hard, dry bowel motions (stools/poo) less often than normal. It is important to tell your doctor or nurse if you have constipation.

## What are the symptoms?

When you are constipated you don't open your bowels as often as usual.

When you do go, you may:

- have hard, dry bowel motions that can be painful to pass
- need to strain to pass the bowel motion
- need to sit on the toilet for much longer than usual
- feel that your bowel hasn't fully emptied.

You may also have:

- a bloated or swollen abdomen
- stomach cramps
- a headache
- a loss of appetite.

## What causes constipation?

Constipation can happen for a number of reasons.

These include:

- certain medicines, like some chemotherapy, anti-sickness medications or pain killers
- having a diet low in fibre (not eating enough grains, fruit and vegetables)
- not drinking enough water
- not moving or exercising enough
- ignoring the urge to have a bowel motion
- some medical conditions e.g. diabetes, thyroid problems or having had a stroke.

### Important

Contact your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist if:

- you have a temperature of 38°C or higher
- you develop sudden, severe abdominal pain and bloating (a hard swollen abdomen)
- you suddenly start vomiting (throwing up)
- it has been more than 3 days since you had a bowel motion
- you have blood in your bowel motions
- you have uncontrolled liquid bowel motions, after being constipated
- you are unable to pass wind.

If you can't contact your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist go to the nearest hospital emergency department for help.

Drink lots of liquids (unless you are on a fluid restriction).

Most people need to drink at least 8-10 glasses (about 2 litres) of liquid every day. Water, fruit and vegetable juices are all good choices.

## Tips to help to prevent or treat constipation

- It is best to treat constipation early before it becomes severe.
- Take medicines for constipation as advised by your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.
- Drink plenty of fluids (unless you are on a fluid restriction).
- Do some gentle exercise, like walking, yoga, tai chi, swimming or cycling.
- Try to establish a regular bowel routine.
- Include fibre in your diet (unless you have been told to avoid fibre).
- If you are having radiotherapy speak to your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist before you take medicines for constipation or change your diet.

### You can increase the amount of fibre in your diet by having:

- oats and wheat bran
- whole-grain cereals
- whole grain rice or pasta
- whole-wheat and grain bread
- fresh fruit and vegetables
- dried fruit seeds and nuts
- a variety of beans such as baked beans, kidney beans and green beans.

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## Common questions

### Why is constipation a problem?

It is uncomfortable and affects how you feel.

If left untreated constipation can cause a bowel blockage (obstruction).

If you are having radiotherapy to your pelvis, constipation can affect your treatment.

### Can medication help with constipation?

There are a number of medicines that work in different ways to help prevent or treat constipation. You may hear these called laxatives or aperients.

It is very important to take these medicines as directed.

Ask your doctor, nurse, radiation therapist or pharmacist for advice.



### What to ask your doctor, nurse or radiation therapy

- What can I do to prevent constipation?
- What medicines can I take for constipation?
- Should I keep a diary of my diet and how often I have bowel motions?
- Do I need to see a dietitian?

### Contact numbers:

Daytime: .....

Night/weekend: .....

### Key terms

**Constipation:** difficulty opening your bowels (doing a poo), or passing hard, dry bowel motions (stools/poo), less often than normal.

**Laxatives:** medicines to treat or prevent constipation (also known as aperients or stool softeners).