

## Treating Constipation Caused by Pain Medicines

Constipation is a common side effect of pain medications. This occurs more often if opioid drugs, such as morphine or hydrocodone are used. Signs of constipation are bowel movements that are difficult, painful or less frequent than is normal for you.

*When pain medicines cause constipation, increasing fiber and fluid intake may not be effective.*

Other causes of constipation may include:

- Poor fluid intake.
- Emotional stress.
- Certain illnesses, including some cancers.
- A low fiber diet.
- Lack of exercise.
- Failure to respond to the urge.
- Medications, especially those used for pain control, nausea, or depression.
- Chemotherapy treatments.

### General Guidelines

The following guidelines will help prevent constipation. **For most people, a bowel movement every day or every other day will prevent feelings of discomfort.**

#### *Time*

Set aside the same time each day to have a bowel movement, especially after breakfast. Respond to the urge right away. You may have to strain if you wait. **Avoid straining** if you have a heart condition.

#### *Exercise*

Exercise can reduce fatigue and improve your overall mood. As you are able, include exercise as part of your daily routine. Exercise alone will not **reverse** constipation from pain medicines.

### ***Fiber***

Fruits and vegetables are part of a healthy diet. They contain fiber, which may help prevent constipation. Prune juice stimulates the bowel. It may help treat chronic constipation. Consider taking ½ to one-cup serving of prune juice or dried prunes each day.

If it becomes difficult to eat fruits and vegetables, fiber supplements (such as Metamucil<sup>®</sup>, Fibercon<sup>®</sup>, Citrucel<sup>®</sup>) may be used to prevent constipation. However, the fiber in fruits, vegetables or supplements alone will not reverse constipation caused by pain medicines.

### ***Fluids***

Drink as much fluid as you can; at least 8–10 glasses a day. As you get older, your body may not tell you to drink enough fluids and you may need to remind yourself to drink plenty of fluids each day. Once again, this alone will not treat constipation from pain medicines.

While the above methods may be helpful, often times they may not work well when constipation is caused by pain medicines. Your doctor, pharmacist or nurse can suggest the best way to treat the problem.

## **Medications and Treatments**

Below is a list of medicines that may be used to treat constipation. If you have any questions about these or any other medications, please ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

**Warning: Do not take any laxative product if you have cramps, nausea, vomiting, or abdominal pain.**

### ***Stool Softener with Stimulant***

**\*\* Recommended First** to prevent constipation caused by pain medicines.

**Examples: Senna and docusate** (Senokot-S<sup>®</sup>, Peri-Colace<sup>®</sup>, many generics).

**Action:** Softens hard stool (docusate) and stimulates bowel wall (senna).

**Use:** Take regularly **to prevent** constipation; start with 2 each day and increase until bowel movement occurs daily or every other day. Do not take more than 8 tablets in a 24-hour period.

**If stools remain hard and dry after taking the softener and stimulant daily for 1 week, add the following:**

### ***Stool Softeners***

**Examples:** Docusate (Colace<sup>®</sup>, Surfak<sup>®</sup>)

**Action:** Keeps stool soft and easier to pass.

**Use:** These are already part the combined products above.

**If constipation still persists after taking these medicines, consider 1 or more of the following:**

### ***Stimulant Laxatives***

**Examples:** Bisacodyl (Dulcolax<sup>®</sup>).

**Action:** Causes the bowel wall to contract which pushes stool through colon.

**Use:** The medicines are used when constipation needs to be quickly managed. These can be taken by mouth or rectally by suppository. Both may cause cramps and abdominal pain. Also, results may come on without warning.

Most often, the rectal route works more quickly. It is suggested if you have an upset stomach. However, if your white blood count or platelets are low from chemotherapy, do not use a suppository. Talk with your doctor or nurse.

### ***Other Medicines***

**Examples:** Lactulose<sup>®</sup>, Golytely<sup>®</sup>, Milk of Magnesia<sup>®</sup>, Sorbitol<sup>®</sup>.

**Action:** Keeps water in the bowel to soften stool.

**Use:** Results may come on without warning. May cause gas, diarrhea and cramping. Take only on the advice of your doctor.

### ***Enema***

**Example:** Fleets<sup>®</sup>.

**Action:** Direct softening and movement of stool in the rectum. Acts quickly. Results may come on without warning.

**Use:** Often, an enema works more quickly. It is suggested if you have an upset stomach. However, if your white count or platelets are low from chemotherapy, do not use. Talk with your doctor or nurse.

### ***Softening Suppository***

**Examples:** Glycerin.

**Action:** Softens the rectum to allow stool to be gently released. Some mild stimulation in the rectum.

**Caution:** If your white count or platelets are low from chemotherapy, do not use a suppository. Talk with your doctor or nurse.

## Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to [hlc@nmh.org](mailto:hlc@nmh.org).

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at [www.nmh.org](http://www.nmh.org).

*Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar a el departamento de representantes para pacientes al 312-926-3112.*

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