Constipation and Cancer Treatment

Constipation is when stool moves slowly through the large intestine, becoming dry and hard. It can be a side effect of cancer treatment, certain medicines, or less activity and diet changes. Drinking fluids, staying active, and medicines your doctor recommends can help. Tell your team early, because untreated constipation can lead to serious problems.

This page explains constipation during cancer care: what it is, what causes it, and how to prevent and ease it. It is for people with cancer and the people caring for them. It starts with the warning signs, because some bowel problems cannot wait.

When to get help sooner

Long-term constipation can lead to fecal impaction, a serious condition where hardened stool blocks the colon or rectum. Unlike ordinary constipation, fecal impaction can be life-threatening and needs immediate medical attention.

NCI says a bowel obstruction also needs immediate medical care.

Call 911 or go to an emergency department if you have intense belly pain with frequent vomiting and extreme bloating, and no stool or gas is passing. NCI describes this pattern as a complete blockage. It is not something to sit out overnight. Do not drive yourself.

Call your care team right away if you have severe belly pain, vomiting, or a swollen, hard belly along with constipation. NCI says blockages need immediate care. If you cannot reach them, go to an emergency department.

Call your cancer team the moment you see it, day or night, if your temperature reaches 100.4°F (38°C) or higher while you are on chemotherapy. CDC treats a fever during chemotherapy as a medical emergency, because it may be the only clue to an infection that can turn life-threatening fast. Do not sit on it until morning. If you cannot reach anyone quickly, head to an emergency department and say you are having chemotherapy.

Call your care team right away if you notice bleeding from your rectum.

Call your care team the same day if you notice any of these:

- Fewer than three bowel movements in the past week.
- A feeling of pressure or incomplete emptying.
- Back or belly pain.

- Changes in urination.
- Nausea.
- Sudden loose stool leaking past a blockage.

Those are the signs of impaction.

Call your care team within a day or two if you are simply constipated, or the medicines they suggested are not working. Tell your doctor. They can recommend medicines and other ways to treat it. Treating it early helps prevent more serious problems.

What constipation is

With the warning signs covered, here is what constipation is and why it happens.

Constipation is the slow movement of stool through the large intestine, the long tube that carries waste out of your body. The longer stool takes to move through, the more fluid it loses. It becomes drier and harder.

If you are constipated, you may be unable to have a bowel movement. You may need to push harder than usual, or have fewer bowel movements than normal. Constipation may last a short time, or it may be chronic and last a long time.

Signs and symptoms of constipation

- Having two or fewer bowel movements in one week.
- Dry, hard, or lumpy stool.
- Pain during a bowel movement.
- Difficulty having a bowel movement.
- Stomach pain or cramps.
- Feeling bloated or nauseous.

What causes it

Constipation in people with cancer may be caused by:

- **Certain types of cancer.** Constipation can be a sign of cancers that press on organs in the belly or block the movement of stool. It can also be a sign of cancers that affect the nerves connected to the bowel.
- **Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy.** Constipation is a common side effect of some types of chemotherapy.
- **Medicines.** Many medicines can cause constipation, including opioid pain medicines, anti-anxiety drugs, anti-nausea drugs, and diuretics.
- **Lifestyle and diet changes.** During treatment you may have less energy for exercise, and your appetite and diet may change. Being less active and eating differently can lead to

constipation.

How it is diagnosed

Finding the cause helps you get relief and avoid serious problems. Your doctor will do a physical exam: looking at and feeling your belly, and listening to your bowel sounds. They may ask how often you have bowel movements, and when your last one was and what it was like. They may also ask whether you have fever, cramps, pain, or bloating.

Sometimes your doctor may do other tests, such as:

- A digital rectal exam, meaning feeling inside the lower rectum with a gloved finger.
- An x-ray of the belly, which can show a tumor or impacted stool.

Ways to prevent and ease it

If your doctor expects your cancer or treatment to cause constipation, they may give you tips and prescribe medicine to prevent it. Many of the same steps help if you become constipated.

- **Drink plenty of liquids.** About 8 cups of water or clear liquids a day helps. Coffee and prune juice can have a laxative effect, and hot drinks can help stool move.
- **Try to be active every day.** Walking, riding a bike, or gentle yoga may be options. You can also do light exercise in a bed or chair. Ask your team what is right for you.
- **Eat at the same time each day.** A regular routine can help return you to your usual number of bowel movements.
- **Keep a record of your bowel movements.** Sharing this with your team helps them treat the problem.
- **Ask about fiber before adding it.** High-fiber foods and fiber supplements can make constipation worse for some people, so check with your doctor first.

Medicines your doctor may recommend

Your doctor may prescribe laxatives to prevent or relieve constipation. **Use only medicines and treatments your doctor recommends.**

- **Osmotics**, like MiraLAX or milk of magnesia, pull water into the bowel to make stool easier to pass.
- **Stool softeners**, like Colace, soften stool by adding water and fat.
- **Stimulant laxatives**, like Senokot, cause the intestines to contract so stool moves along.

Do not use suppositories or enemas unless your doctor recommends them. In some people with cancer, these can cause bleeding, infection, or other harmful effects.

Getting support

Side effects like constipation can be hard to deal with, both physically and emotionally. Ask for support from your health care team. If you are caring for someone with cancer, you can help by:

- Encouraging fluids.
- Supporting gentle activity.
- Keeping track of bowel movements.
- Telling the care team about warning signs.

Sources

- National Cancer Institute — Constipation and Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/constipation)
- National Cancer Institute — Bowel Obstruction and Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/bowel-obstruction)
- CDC — Fever and Cancer Treatment (cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html)

Source: National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/constipation)

Last updated: 2026-10-27

Online: cancerexplained.org/side-effects/constipation

Educational information only, not medical advice. An AI-assisted editorial system helped prepare this page. No named medical reviewer has reviewed it unless one is listed.

Free to print, copy and share unchanged. No permission needed. Please do not alter the medical content. Cite: cancerexplained.org. Educational information, not medical advice.