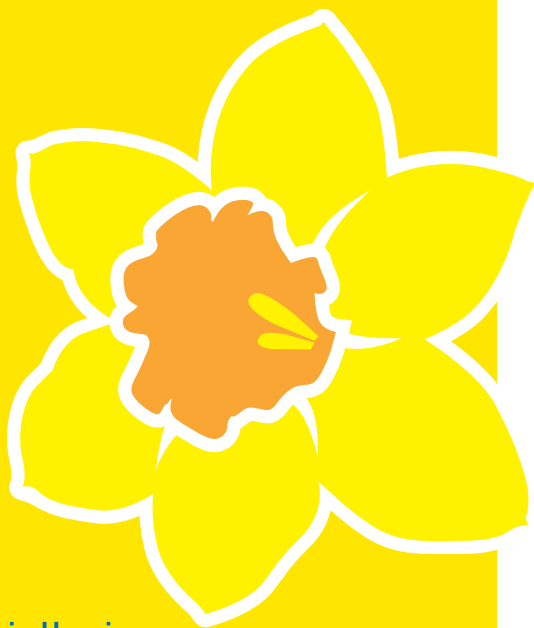


Patient and carer information

Advice on constipation



Marie Curie Hospice



Marie Curie
Cancer Care



What is constipation?

Constipation is one of the most common digestive problems. It occurs when there is insufficient water in your faeces (motions or stools are other words used to describe faeces) leaving them dry, hard and difficult or painful to pass.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms vary from person to person, but include the following:

- going to the toilet to pass faeces less often
- a feeling that the bowel is not empty after going to the toilet
- having to strain to pass faeces
- faeces that are dry and hard and look like rabbit pellets
- loss of appetite, feeling bloated
- stomach ache and cramps sometimes accompanied by headache and nausea
- a furred tongue
- fatigue

Sometimes constipation can alternate with diarrhoea. When this happens, the diarrhoea is an overflow of liquid faeces that passes around the hard faeces and is mistaken for diarrhoea.

What causes constipation?

It is not always easy to know what has caused constipation, but it can be due to one or more of the following:

- not drinking enough fluids
- not taking enough fibre in your diet, which results in less water being absorbed into the faeces

- medication such as painkillers, antidepressants and antacids
- iron and calcium supplements
- not taking enough exercise
- drinking excessive amounts of tea and coffee, which increases urine production and reduces fluid in the faeces
- abdominal surgery, which makes it difficult for faeces to pass along the intestine because of inflammation
- haemorrhoids, which make it difficult or painful to push faeces out of the rectum
- ignoring the urge to pass faeces
- being unable to go to the toilet when you need to pass faeces

What can I do to prevent constipation?

There are a number of things you can do to try to avoid constipation:

- Drink more water and avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Eat plenty of fibre such as wholemeal bread, cereals, fruit and vegetables.
- Eat smaller quantities of processed foods such as cheese and white bread.
- Eat breakfast.
- Try to develop a regular routine and allow your bowels time to work.
- Never ignore the urge to go to the toilet, as the faeces will just get drier and harder.
- Keep active by walking or exercising regularly.

What can I do if I am constipated?

- Drink more water - six to eight cups a day and have a warm drink first thing in the morning.

- Increase your fibre intake - try eating more fruit and vegetables.
- Increase your exercise if possible.
- Talk to a nurse or doctor if the problem does not resolve, as you may need stool softeners and laxatives to help you go to the toilet and prevent further problems.
- Treat painful haemorrhoids, as directed by your doctor or nurse.

What if I cannot resolve my constipation?

You may need treatment to resolve the constipation and prevent complications. If you have any of the following, it is important that you tell your doctor or nurse.

- pain in your stomach or rectum
- feeling sick or vomiting
- bleeding from the back passage

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