

# Moving oncology care forward so that you can look forward to life's moments

*Constipation in persons receiving cancer treatment*



# Managing constipation during cancer treatment

Constipation is often a symptom of cancer itself and / or cancer treatment. It can be defined as having less than three bowel movements a week. This may also include:



Your stools are dry, hard and lumpy



Your stools are unusually small or large



Your bowel movements are difficult and /or painful to pass



You feel that you are unable to completely empty your bowel



Abdominal pain

However, it is important to realise that each person's bowel movement frequency varies widely. Some people will have three bowel movements a day, whereas others will only have one to two a week. It is important that you stay as close as possible to your unique bowel movement pattern.

## / Constipation complications

Usually, constipation doesn't cause major complications and can be resolved easily with dietary and lifestyle changes as well as medication. Some people experience constipation only for a short period, whereas for others constipation can be a long-term (chronic) condition. Constipation can cause the following complications:



Abdominal pain and discomfort



Haemorrhoids (piles)



Faecal impaction (dry hard stool collect in the rectum)



Bowel incontinence (leakage of liquid stools)



Anal fissures (tears in the skin around the anus)



Rectal bleeding

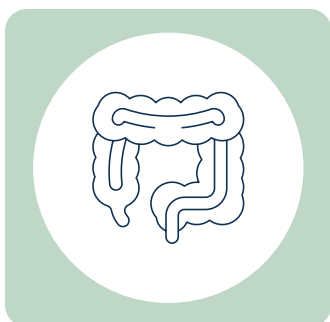


Decreased quality of life

## 2 Managing constipation

What to do	What to avoid
Take in at least 8 glasses of water per day (2-3 litres of water)	Foods high in fat
Increase your intake of dietary fibre (soluble and insoluble fibre) e.g. whole grain bread and cereals; raw, cooked or dried fruits and vegetables (with the skin on); legumes (beans, peas and lentils), and nuts	Deep-fried foods
	Avoid coffee and foods / sweets containing caffeine e.g., chocolate
	Dairy products (e.g. milk, cheese) as it is high in calcium and can worsen constipation
Try foods that are natural laxatives e.g., prunes / prune juice, papayas, rhubarb	Beef as it is higher in fats than other proteins, and can slow digestion
	Limit refined grains or products made with refined wheat flour e.g., white bread / rolls, muffins, white rice, refined cereals, cakes, cookies and pastries etc. as these food sources are lower in fibre

## 3 General guidelines



- Increase your activity. Try to exercise daily. Ask your healthcare team about the type and duration of exercises that are suitable for you
- Avoid resisting the urge to have a bowel movement and make time to take bathroom breaks
- Speak to your healthcare provider before you start taking any over-the-counter laxatives, stool softeners or enemas to treat your constipation
- Your doctor may suggest the addition of psyllium to your diet

# *Managing* constipation during cancer treatment

Life Oncology units have multidisciplinary teams that can support you during your journey to recovery – this includes registered dietitians (RDs).

The following are some of the areas a registered dietitian can help you in:



Assess your nutritional status and your current dietary intake



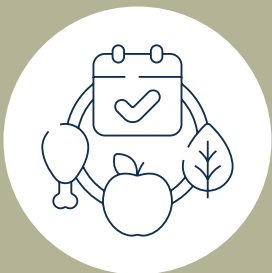
Provide you with an individualised meal plan for optimal nutrition



Recommend appropriate oral supplements to provide you with additional nutrients, including protein and energy when you are not meeting your nutritional needs through food alone



Provide you with guidelines on how to manage cancer treatment side effects that influence your dietary intake



If you need assistance with any of the above areas – ask your healthcare provider to refer you to a registered dietitian.



# References

## **Cleveland Clinic**

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/4059-constipation>

## **CANSA**

<https://cansa.org.za/files/2021/04/Fact-Sheet-on-Nutritional-Guidelines-for-Individuals-Undergoing-Cancer-Treatment-April-2021.pdf>

## **National Healthcare Service Scotland**

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/stomach-liver-and-gastrointestinal-tract/constipation>

## **Kidney Care Canada**

<https://www.kidneycancercanada.ca/managing-side-effects/#constipation>

## **National Healthcare Service UK**

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/constipation/>

## **Nutrician & Diagnosis-Related Care**

Escott-Stump, S. (2015). China: Wolters Kluwer

## **Krause's Food and the Nutrician Care Process**

Mahan, L. K., Escott-Stump, S., & Raymond, J. L. (2012). St. Louis: Elsevier Saunders

[www.lifehealthcare.co.za](http://www.lifehealthcare.co.za)

**Life** Oncology

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