

## Managing constipation with medicine

If the advice in this leaflet on how to manage constipation is not helping please discuss your concerns about constipation with a health care professional or GP. You may require a prescription for regular laxatives. These are medicines that either loosen the stool or stimulate a bowel action.

Different laxatives work in different ways. The aim is to use the gentlest dose in order to keep your bowels working regularly. Sometimes, a combination of different laxatives may be required to soften the stool and to stimulate your bowel to move. This will usually be decided by the medical and nursing teams looking after you, and may require regular discussions and questions about your stools to help determine the type of laxative required.

As you know your body best, you may need to adjust the dose of your laxative to suit your individual needs. Please discuss any concerns with a health care professional.

## How we produce our information

All of our leaflets are produced by staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and this information is not sponsored or influenced in any way. Every effort is made to ensure that the information included in this leaflet is accurate and complete and we hope that it will add to any professional advice you have had. All our leaflets are evidence based where appropriate and they are regularly reviewed and updated. If you are concerned about your health in any way, you should consult your healthcare team.

We rely on a number of sources to gather evidence for our information. All of our information is in line with accepted national or international guidelines where possible. Where no guidelines exist, we rely on other reliable sources such as systematic reviews, published clinical trials data or a consensus review of experts. We also use medical textbooks, journals and government publications.

References for this leaflet can be obtained by telephoning 0151 556 5570.

If you need this leaflet in large print, Braille, audio or different language, please call 0151 556 5570.

If you have a comment, concern, compliment or complaint, please call 0151 556 5203.

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## Constipation

Rehabilitation and Support

A guide for patients and carers

Constipation is infrequent, difficult or incomplete bowel opening that may lead to pain and discomfort. Stools ('poo' / 'faeces' / 'motions') can range from small hard 'rocks', to a large bulky mass, and constipation can cause the sensation of not completely emptying the bowel. Symptoms include stools becoming hard and difficult or painful to pass. What is considered as normal will vary for each person. However, it generally refers to how easily stool passes out of the body and how often this occurs.

## Why do I get constipated?

### Common causes of constipation may include :-

- Not drinking enough fluids
- A lack of fibre in the diet
- Being less active (which may be linked with mobility problems or fatigue)
- Not acting on the urge to pass a stool (this may be linked to not being near a toilet if in hospital)
- Certain medicines, such as pain killers, anti-depressants, diuretics (water tablets), and iron supplements

- Psychological factors (such as being away from your own loo, having to use a bed pan or commode, or being embarrassed at having to ask for help)
- Emotions (including stress, anxiety, depression)
- Physical factors such as pain, shortness of breath (limiting mobility)
- Medical conditions such as diabetes, Parkinson's disease, stroke, bowel or brain conditions

For people with a cancer diagnosis, constipation is more likely to occur as a result of the cancer itself or as a side effect from treatment. It can be caused by chemotherapy drugs and various pain killers, and other groups of medications (listed above). This is not a reason to avoid medicines. Instead, it is important to recognise constipation in order to manage the symptom.

## How do I know if I'm constipated?

If your bowel movements become less frequent than is usual for you, it is possible that you may be constipated.

Health professionals regard constipation as not having a bowel movement for 3 days in a row (but it should be taken into account what you consider your 'normal' pattern to be).

### The following could indicate that you are constipated :-

- You may have a lot of wind ('flatus', or 'farting'), and your stomach may feel full and bloated

- You may experience stomach cramps and stomach ache
- You may need to strain in order to pass a stool
- Bowel motions may be painful and difficult to pass, and stools are small, hard and dry
- You may feel that you still need to open your bowels after passing a stool
- You may experience leakage of soft, watery stools, like diarrhoea – this is known as **overflow**, where watery stool builds up and leaks around the constipated stool

## How can I manage constipation without medicine?

- Drink more fluids (water, fruit juices and hot drinks may help)
- Exercise as your condition allows you to
- Increase dietary fibre – if unsure involve a health care professional for advice (GP, District Nurse, Specialist Nurse, Dietitian) as fibre may not be recommended for certain cancers
- Go to the bathroom when you feel the urge and avoid straining to prevent yourself from opening your bowels
- Try to keep your usual bowel routine and, if in hospital, discuss with health professionals to help with privacy, or if you cannot use a commode or bedpan

