

Help with eating if you have... constipation

This leaflet gives advice on preventing and managing constipation.

Introduction

Certain types of cancer, treatment, surgery and medication (e.g., for pain, nausea) may cause constipation. Symptoms of constipation include:

- Not passing stools (faeces) as often as you normally do
- Passing unusually hard stools
- Having to strain more than usual
- Feeling that your bowels have not completely emptied
- Gas, or flatulence
- Abdominal discomfort or distention

You may be able to improve your symptoms by adjusting your diet; your doctor may also recommend a laxative.

General advice

Aim to eat regular meals throughout the day e.g., breakfast, lunch and evening meal.

If you find that your appetite is poor, try to have small, frequent meals with nourishing drinks in-between, such as a fruit smoothie.

If you are at risk of bowel obstruction, please discuss with your doctor and ask for a dietetic referral if further support is required.

Dietary fibre

Dietary fibre (sometimes called 'roughage') is the indigestible part of food. It helps to increase stool bulk and prevent constipation from developing. Fibre is found in the following:

- Oats, beans, peas, pulses, lentils
- Fruit and vegetables, e.g., potatoes with skins
- Whole grain and whole-wheat breads, cereals and pasta, brown rice

Gradually adding more fibre to your diet can minimise wind and bloating; it can take up to six weeks to improve your bowel function. Remember that wind-producing high fibre foods such as pulses, beans, lentils, and bran fibre such as that found in wholemeal bread or wholewheat cereal may contribute towards your symptoms, so adjust to your tolerance.

Linseed (also known as flaxseed)

Linseed may improve symptoms of constipation. Start with one teaspoon of linseeds per day gradually building up to a maximum of two tablespoons (24 grams) per day, as required, added to your breakfast cereal, soups, or yogurts, for example. Ensure you have an extra 150ml of fluid with each tablespoon of linseed.

Fluid

It is important to drink extra fluid if you are increasing your fibre intake. Fibre soaks up water in the gut and makes stools softer and easier to pass.

Aim to drink at least 8-10 cups (1.5-2 litres or 3-4 pints) of fluid per day, such as water, herbal teas, hot water and lemon, fruit and vegetable juices, or squash each day. Sips throughout the day will help reduce feeling bloated associated with large volumes of drink taken at once.

Alcohol does not count towards your daily fluid needs.

Natural laxatives

Natural remedies, such as syrup of figs, kiwi, rhubarb, papaya, prunes or prune juice have been found to improve symptoms in some patients.

Physical activity

Gentle daily exercise or being as mobile as possible may help to prevent and improve constipation by stimulating bowel movements. For example, just a short walk or chair exercises can help.

Recipe ideas

High energy smoothie

200ml full fat milk

2 tablespoons (12g) skimmed milk powder

2 scoops (20g) ice cream

1 cup (50g) fresh, tinned or frozen fruit

Sugar to taste

Blend the ingredients together until smooth. Serve chilled.

Try these combinations:

- Toffee yoghurt with a banana
- Vanilla ice cream with tinned peaches and a teaspoon of honey
- Peach yoghurt with tinned raspberries

Enriched soup

Condensed, tinned, packet or home-made soups can be used. Make up with fortified milk where possible.

To clear soups add: beans, lentils, whole-wheat pasta or potato.

Try these combinations:

- Tomato soup with added pasta and baked beans
- Vegetable soup with lentils, beans or potato
- Broccoli or cauliflower soup with grated cheese and cream

If you continue to have constipation or experiencing low appetite, ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to a dietitian.

Useful Contacts

Macmillan Cancer Support www.macmillan.org.uk

World Cancer Research Fund www.wcrf-uk.org

Cancer Research UK www.cancerresearchuk.org

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Produced by Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust Dietitians

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