

Information sheet – Bowels

Patient/ Family/Whānau guide

Constipation

Constipation means having fewer bowel movements than usual or finding it difficult to pass stool (poop). It can also mean your stool is hard and dry.

What causes constipation?

- Certain medications, especially pain relief drugs.
- Not moving around enough or feeling weak.
- Not eating or drinking enough.
- The effects of an illness or medical condition.
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What can happen if the bowels aren't working well?

- Feeling nauseous or vomiting.
- Stomach pain and bloating (swelling).
- Loss of appetite (not wanting to eat or drink).
- Difficulty taking medications that help with other symptoms.
- Increased pain or discomfort.
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What can be done?

Your healthcare team, including your caregiver, will work with you to prevent and treat constipation. They will try to find the cause and recommend ways to manage it. Here are some things you can do:

- Track your bowel movements: Write down when you have a bowel movement.
- Drink enough fluids: Drink as much liquid as you can, and warm drinks can sometimes help.
- Eat fruit: Fruit and fruit juices can help, like kiwi or prune juice.
- Stay active: Try to move around or do light exercise each day.
- Eat fibre: Fibre helps, but only if you're able to move around and drink fluids. Large amounts of fibre or certain laxatives aren't always recommended.
- Use prescribed laxatives: Your doctor may recommend laxatives like Laxol tablets (Docusate Sodium) to help soften stools. These are usually taken regularly. Sometimes, you may need extra help from other medicines like Molaxole (Lax-Sachets), which you mix with water or another drink. Your doctor will guide you on how to adjust the dose based on your needs.
- Suppositories or enemas: If needed, a nurse can give you a suppository or enema or show you how to use them yourself.

When should I tell my healthcare team?

Let your nurse know if:

- You haven't had a bowel movement for three days in a row, or if it's different from your usual pattern and causing discomfort.
- If you experience bloating, pain, or can't pass gas (wind).
- If you're feeling nauseous or vomiting.
- If there are any other changes in your bowel-like habits, tell your team early, so they can help sooner.

Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea means having loose, watery stools. It can happen for many reasons, such as:

- Colorectal cancer or other bowel diseases.
- Stomach bugs or infections.
- Treatments like radiation or chemotherapy.
- Antibiotics or issues with how your body absorbs food.
- Overflow from constipation (when stool becomes too soft and leaks out).

What to do if you have diarrhoea:

- Drink fluids if able to, like water or very diluted juice.
- Seek advice from a health professional on reducing or stopping laxatives.
- If it doesn't get better, see your doctor. They might need to check what's causing it and recommend a treatment plan, which could include changes in diet, medications, or anti-diarrhoea drugs.