



Dietary advice for adults experiencing constipation following radiotherapy or chemotherapy

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Constipation (infrequent and uncomfortable or painful bowel movements) may be caused by not having enough fibre or fluid in your diet, being less active than usual or as a side effect of some medications or treatments.

It is important that you mention to your nurse or doctor any signs or symptoms of constipation, such as bloating or discomfort when or on passing stools as you may need further investigations to find the cause and provide the right treatment.

Remember, if you are eating less than usual or are following a liquid diet then your bowel movements are likely to be less frequent. This is quite normal and should not cause concern unless you are experiencing discomfort.

The following tips may help ease your constipation:

- Increase the amount of high-fibre foods in your diet gradually. If you are not used to eating a lot of high-fibre foods, try making one of the following changes every two to three days:
 - Eat wholemeal and wholegrain breads instead of white
 - Use wholemeal flour instead of white flour
 - Include more high-fibre breakfast cereals e.g. Bran Flakes, Shredded Wheat or Weetabix
 - Include extra beans, pulses, peas and lentils in cooking
 - Aim for five portions of fruit or vegetables daily, eating the skins where possible
 - Snack on dried fruit, nuts and seeds
 - Try eating tinned or dried prunes daily
 - Choose brown rice, wholemeal pasta or wholemeal chapatti

- Drink plenty of fluids. You should aim for about two litres per day (8–10 cups), you may need extra fluid during hot weather or when exercising
- Eat regular meals and establish a routine with meal times
- Chew food thoroughly, take your time with meals and don't overeat in one sitting
- If possible try to take some gentle exercise (e.g. walking) daily. Little and often is best. Exercise so that you feel warm but not out of breath. Check with your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist about suitable exercise for you
- Try and establish a regular routine in your lifestyle as this may help you to regulate your bowel habits. For example, waking up at the same time every morning and eating and exercising at similar times each day
- Laxatives may also help if symptoms persist. These can be bought from a chemist or prescribed by your doctor

If your symptoms do not improve or you are losing weight, please ask your radiographer, nurse or doctor to refer you to the dietitian.

Recommended meal and snack ideas

Breakfasts:

- High-fibre cereals such as wheat biscuits or flaked bran with milk and added sliced fresh or dried fruit
- Porridge
- Wholemeal or wholegrain toast with butter or margarine and jam, marmalade or peanut butter
- Wholemeal chapatti

Main meals:

- Jacket potato with beans and salad
- Meat or fish with vegetables and potatoes, including skins
- Curries and casseroles with extra beans or pulses served with brown rice or wholemeal chapattis

Snacks:

- Cheese and wholegrain crackers
- Sandwich made with wholemeal or wholegrain bread
- Yoghurt with extra fruit
- Cheese or beans on wholemeal toast
- Malt loaf
- Vegetable pakora
- Nuts, seeds or dried fruits

Puddings:

- Fresh, stewed or tinned fruit

Sources of further information

University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust

The Patrick Room
Cancer Centre
Queen Elizabeth Hospital
Birmingham
B15 2TH
Telephone: 0121 697 8417

About this information

This guide is provided for general information only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Every effort is taken to ensure that this information is accurate and consistent with current knowledge and practice at the time of publication.

This information was produced by the QEHB radiotherapy dietitian.

Please use the space below to write down any questions you may have and bring this with you to your next appointment.

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