

Constipation from Opioids (Narcotics)

Opioid analgesics (narcotics) cause constipation in most people. Opioids slow down the stool as it passes along the intestinal tract. This causes the stool to become hard. If you have hard stools, have difficulty passing bowel movements and the movements become infrequent, then you have constipation.

Constipation can be very bothersome and last as long as you are taking narcotics on a regular basis. Therefore, it is important that you learn to manage your bowels effectively. This information sheet gives you basic information to help you prevent or treat constipation.

What Can I Do Myself to Prevent Constipation?

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Make a plan to avoid constipation and stick to it as long as you are taking narcotics. Review your plan with your doctor or nurse. Here are some things to include in your plan:

- Eat foods that have helped you to relieve constipation in the past.
- Eat foods high in fiber or roughage. Some examples are uncooked fruits and vegetable and whole grain breads and cereals. Try prune juice. Buy some unprocessed bran and add 1 or 2 tablespoons to your food. Keep a shaker of bran handy at mealtimes and sprinkle it on foods. If your appetite is poor, do not force yourself to eat fiber.
- Drink plenty of liquids. Eight to ten 8-ounce glasses of fluid each day will help keep your stools soft. Warm liquids often help your bowels to move. Have a warm drink about half an hour before your planned time for a bowel movement.
- Exercise as much as you are able each day or at least every other day. Increasing the amount you walk can help. Check with your doctor or nurse about what exercises are best for you.
- Plan your bowel movements for the same time each day, if possible. Set aside time for sitting on the toilet or commode, preferably after a meal.

What About Stool Softeners and Laxatives?

Many people taking narcotics need the help of a stool softener. In fact, stool softeners alone often don't work and you may need to add a gentle laxative. Be sure to check with your doctor or nurse before taking any laxative or stool softener on your own.

Your doctor or nurse may suggest taking a laxative on a regular schedule rather than waiting for constipation to happen. There are many types and brands of laxatives. Although most are available without a prescription, talk to your doctor about which may work the best and be affordable for you.

What About Bulk Laxatives, Like Metamucil®?

Bulk laxatives like Metamucil®, Citrucel®, and Fiberall® absorb water and expand to increase bulk and moisture content of the stool. They should only be used if you are able to drink plenty of fluids throughout the day.

What About Suppositories and Enemas?

Both can be used as an added step to treat constipation. It is generally not a good idea to rely on enemas as part of a regular plan to avoid constipation. Talk to your doctor or nurse before using either of these alternatives.

Important Points to Remember:

- Put together a plan to prevent constipation and stick to it as long as you are taking your opioid analgesic.
- Do **not** stop taking your pain medication even if controlling the constipation proves more difficult than controlling the pain.
- Aim for a bowel movement every second or third day rather than every day.
- Call your doctor before taking any stool softeners or laxatives.

Examples of High Fiber Foods

Cereals and flours	Bran cereals, whole-wheat bread, rye bread and crackers, wheat germ, corn, cornmeal, wild rice, brown rice, barley, popcorn
Fruits	Fresh, canned, or dried fruits, especially those with skin or seeds (apples, plums, pears, peaches, tomatoes, berries, raisins and dates)
Vegetables	Any raw or cooked vegetable (not overcooked) such as carrots, cabbage, peas, dry beans, and lentils

High Fiber Home Recipes

Fruit Pudding

1-2 tablespoons one to three times a day

Pudding recipe: (in blender combine)

- 3 oranges peeled
- 4 apples with skins
- 2 cups raisins and dates
- 2 cups prunes
- add prune juice to consistency of sauce or pudding

Can keep in refrigerator 7-10 days, can be frozen

Senna Prunes

1-2 prunes every other night

Senna prune recipe:

- 1 ounce senna leaves, simmer in 1 quart of water
- strain and discard leaves
- add prunes to liquid, let simmer in extract until liquid is absorbed

Bran Muffins

1-2 muffins daily

Bran muffin recipe:

- 2 ½ tsp. baking soda
- ½ quart buttermilk
- 2 ½ cups flour (1 ½ whole wheat; 1 white)*
- 1 cups sugar
- ½ package (15 oz.) Raisin Bran cereal
- 1 tsp. salt
- 2 eggs slightly beaten, or 1 cup egg substitute
- ½ cup oil

* ½ cup wheat germ may be substituted for ½ cup whole-wheat flour

Bake in greased muffin pans at 400 degrees for 18-20 minutes. Makes two dozen muffins.

References:

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