

Diarrhea and constipation are common side effects of cancer treatment. The severity of diarrhea or constipation varies among patients and depends on the type of treatment you receive. Sometimes side effects improve as you adjust to treatment. Most side effects go away when treatment ends. Managing side effects, called palliative (supportive) care, is an important part of cancer treatment. Talk to your healthcare team about any side effects that you have.

DIARRHEA

Diarrhea is the passage of frequent and watery bowel movements. Diarrhea occurs when foods and liquids pass through the body too quickly. If diarrhea is severe or lasts a long time, the body cannot absorb enough water and nutrients. It is important to manage diarrhea to prevent dehydration (not enough water in the body) and poor nutrition. See Nutrition and Hydration section for more.

In addition to a side effect of cancer treatment, diarrhea can also be a sign of infection or sensitivity to certain foods. Work with your healthcare team to determine the cause of your diarrhea so it can be treated.

Tell your healthcare team if you are experiencing new or worsening diarrhea or constipation. Do not take over-the-counter medications without talking to your doctor.

Follow these tips to manage diarrhea:

- Drink clear liquids including water, ginger ale, sports drinks, and clear broth, or suck on popsicles to stay hydrated.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and acidic drinks such as orange juice.
- Drink at least one cup of liquid after each loose bowel movement to prevent dehydration.
- As diarrhea starts to improve, eat foods that are easy to digest, such as white rice, puffed rice cereal (or other low-fiber grains), soft fruits (such as bananas and applesauce), and cooked soft vegetables without seeds or skins.
- Avoid foods that can make diarrhea worse, including high-fiber foods, raw fruits and vegetables, spicy food and high-fat foods.
- Avoid drinks and foods that contain sugar alcohols (for example, xylitol and sorbitol). These are often found in sugar-free products.
- Avoid milk and milk products if they seem to make diarrhea worse.
- Ask your healthcare team and/or registered dietitian if you might benefit from taking a probiotic supplement. Probiotics are good bacteria that help with digestion. Do not take any supplements without talking to your healthcare team first.

- If changes to your foods do not help, your doctor may prescribe medication. Do not take medications without talking to your healthcare team first.
- Take care of your skin. Frequent watery stools can damage the skin around your anal area. After a bowel movement, wash with warm water or use bathroom wipes to clean the area. Be sure to gently dry the area too. On the clean, dry skin, apply a water-repellent ointment, such as one that contains petroleum jelly, to help prevent skin irritation.

SEVERE SIDE EFFECTS

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Loose bowel movements for more than two days
- Blood in your stool
- Moderate to severe abdominal pain or cramping
- Fever of 100.4°F or higher
- Inability to control bowel movements
- Symptoms of dehydration (dark urine, infrequent urination, dizziness, dry mouth or dry skin, or irregular heartbeat/pulse)

CONSTIPATION

Constipation occurs when your bowel movements become difficult to pass or occur less often than normal. You may experience the following symptoms:

- Small, hard bowel movements
- Stomachache and/or cramps
- Passing a lot of gas
- Swelling in the stomach
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Not having regular bowel movements

Constipation can be a side effect of cancer treatment. Older people may be at greater risk. Low fluid intake or taking pain medications, and other diseases such as diabetes, can also cause constipation. Follow these tips to prevent or treat constipation:

- Gradually increase the fiber in your diet. Fiber is found in plant foods, such as whole fruits, vegetables, beans, legumes, whole grain cereals, bread and oatmeal. A good goal is to

eat between 25-35 grams of fiber daily. Ask your doctor or a registered dietitian how much fiber is right for you.

- Drink plenty of liquids. Most people need to drink at least 8-10 cups of liquid each day. You may need more based on your treatment and the medications you take.
- Drinking warm or hot fluids in the morning may be helpful.
- Try plum or prune juice. Start small with about half a cup.
- Exercise and physical activity can help with constipation. Ask your healthcare team for an exercise program.
- Ask your healthcare team and/or registered dietitian if you may benefit from taking a fiber supplement. Do not take any supplements without first talking to your doctor.
- Take only medicines that are prescribed by your doctor. Your doctor may prescribe a stool softener or laxative.

TRACKING SIDE EFFECTS

Certain foods, medications or activities may trigger or make your diarrhea and/or constipation worse. Track your daily health and habits in a journal or app on your phone. This may help you and your doctor discover what triggers your side effects.

With the LLS Health Manager™ mobile app, you can use your phone to track side effects, medication, food and hydration. You can also set up reminders to take medications and to eat and drink water throughout the day. You can share the information with your doctor to identify patterns and develop strategies to help manage your diarrhea and/or constipation.

Visit www.LLS.org/HealthManager to download the LLS Health Manager™ mobile app.

NUTRITION AND HYDRATION

Diarrhea and constipation may make it difficult for you to eat enough and stay hydrated. Malnutrition occurs when a person does not eat or absorb enough calories or key nutrients needed for healthy body function. Dehydration occurs when a person does not drink or absorb enough liquids for healthy body function. Even mild dehydration can drain your energy and make you tired.

Signs of dehydration include

- Extreme thirst
- Dark-colored urine (pee)
- Less frequent urination
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Reduced sweating
- Dry mouth

Your fluid intake is probably adequate if

- You rarely feel thirsty
- Your urine is colorless or light yellow

Good nutrition is important for health, energy and quality of life. Cancer patients who are malnourished or dehydrated are at greater risk for health complications, hospitalization, infections, loss of muscle strength and poor quality of life. These patients may need to delay, change or stop cancer treatment.

Any side effect that can make eating or drinking difficult increases the risk for health complications and poor quality of life. Visit www.LLS.org/booklets (filter by Side Effect Management) to view the full *Side-Effect Management* series.

Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Team

- **Is my cancer treatment likely to cause constipation and/or diarrhea?**
- **What can I do to prevent or manage these side effects?**
- **Are there medications I can take?**
- **What can I eat or drink to help with constipation and/or diarrhea?**
- **Can I be referred to a registered dietitian?**
- **Can I be referred to palliative (supportive) care for help managing side effects?**
- **What signs or symptoms require a trip to the emergency room?**

GET ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's **Information Specialists**, master's level oncology social workers and health educators, can provide information and support and connect you to our **Clinical Trial Support Center** and **Registered Dietitians**.

- Call **800.955.4572** Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. (ET)
- Visit www.LLS.org/PatientSupport

Acknowledgement

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