

How to Prevent Constipation After Surgery

Constipation is a common problem after surgery. Many things can make constipation more likely after a surgery, including:

- Certain medicines, especially numbing medicines (anesthetics) and very strong pain medicines called opioids.
- Feeling stressed because of the surgery.
- Eating different foods than normal.
- Being less active.

Symptoms of constipation include:

- Having fewer than three bowel movements a week.
- Straining to have a bowel movement.
- Having hard, dry, or larger-than-normal stools (feces).
- Discomfort in the lower abdomen, such as cramps or bloating.
- Not feeling relief after having a bowel movement.
- Nausea and vomiting.

You can take steps to help prevent constipation after surgery.

Follow these instructions at home:

Eating and drinking



- Eat foods that have a lot of fiber in them, such as beans, bran, whole grains, and fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Limit foods that are high in fat and processed sugars, such as fried or sweet foods. These include french fries, hamburgers, cookies, and candy.
- Take a fiber supplement as told by your health care provider. If you are not taking a fiber supplement and you think you are not getting enough fiber from foods, talk to your health care provider about adding a fiber supplement to your diet.
- Drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow.
- Drink clear fluids, especially water. Avoid drinking alcohol, caffeine, and soda. These can make constipation worse.

Activity



- After surgery, return to your normal activities slowly, or when your health care provider says it is okay.
- Start walking as soon as you can. Try to go a little farther each day.
- Once your health care provider approves, do some sort of regular exercise. This helps prevent constipation.

Bowel movements

- Go to the restroom when you have the urge to go. **Do not** hold it in.
- Try drinking something hot to get a bowel movement started.
- Keep track of how often you use the restroom.

Medicines

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Talk to your health care provider about medicines that may help prevent constipation, particularly if you have a history of constipation. Your health care provider may suggest a stool softener, laxative, or fiber supplement.
- **Do not** take any medicines without talking to your health care provider first.

Contact a health care provider if:

- You used stool softeners or laxatives and still have not had a bowel movement within 24–48 hours after using them.
- You have not had a bowel movement in 3 days.
- You have a fever.

Get help right away if you have:

- Constipation that lasts for more than 4 days or if your symptoms get worse.
- Bright red blood in your stool.
- Pain in the abdomen or rectum.
- Very bad cramping.
- Thin, pencil-like stools.
- Unexplained weight loss.

Summary

- Constipation is a common problem after surgery. Many things can make constipation more likely after a surgery, including certain medicines, eating different foods than normal, and being less active.
- Symptoms of constipation include having fewer than three bowel movements a week, straining to have a bowel movement, and cramps or bloating in the lower abdomen.

- To help prevent constipation, you should eat foods that are high in fiber, drink plenty of fluids, and get regular physical activity.
- Your health care provider may suggest medicines, such as stool softeners or laxatives, to help prevent constipation.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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