

How to Manage Constipation with Diet and Lifestyle Changes

This handout offers information on how to manage constipation with diet and lifestyle changes. You may be constipated if you:

- Have hard, dry stools (poo).
- Have difficulty or pain passing stool.
- Have fewer (less) bowel movements (passing stool from your body) than what is normal for you.
- Fewer than 3 bowel movements a week.
- Need to strain or push to have a bowel movement.
- Feel like you have not emptied your bowels fully.
- Have bloating, stomach aches, a lot of gas/burping, and a low appetite.

Not everyone has a bowel movement every day. You may have fewer bowel movements if you are eating less food than what is normal for you.

What causes constipation when you have cancer?

- Pain medications (examples: codeine, hydromorphone, morphine, or oxycodone)
- Chemotherapy medications
- Anti-nausea medications (example: ondansetron)
- Supplements (example: iron)
- Location of your cancer
- Changes in your diet
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not getting enough physical activity
- Not eating enough fibre
- Stress, anxiety, or depression

What you can do to manage constipation

1. Drink lots of fluids every day

- Drink 2 to 3 litres (8 to 12 cups) of fluid every day. This includes: water, juice, tea, coffee, milk, chocolate milk, smoothies, and nutritional supplement drinks. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have been told to restrict your fluids because of other health concerns.
- Warm fluids may help you have bowel movements more easily.

2. Choose foods with high fibre

- Include high fibre foods with every meal (read the [Low and High Fibre Food Choices](#) handout for examples of foods you can choose).

- Take a fibre supplement if you are not getting enough fibre from your diet.
Examples: psyllium (Metamucil), wheat dextrin (Benefiber), methylcellulose (Citrucel), guar gum (The Right Fibre), and chicory root/inulin (Clearly Fibre).
- 3. Be physically active (exercise) every day, if you are able
 - Plan to participate in physical activity for 20 to 30 minutes each day.
 - Start with 10 minutes of activity and gradually increase over time.
- 4. Eat more probiotics
 - Probiotics are “good” bacteria and yeasts that help keep your gut healthy. Your gut includes your stomach and bowels.
 - Food sources of probiotics include yogurt (such as Activia), drinkable yogurts, kefir, buttermilk, and other fermented foods such as sauerkraut, miso, kimchi, and tempeh. Check the ingredient label on food products for “live or active bacteria”.
 - Do not take probiotic supplements during your cancer treatments. Talk to your healthcare team if you have questions about this.
- 5. Create a bathroom routine
 - Go to the bathroom around the same time every day.
 - Try to relax and take your time.
 - Do not push hard or strain when trying to have a bowel movement.
 - Place your feet on a low foot stool when sitting on the toilet. This position may make it easier for you to fully empty your bowels.

You may need to ask your doctor about medications to help with constipation (example: laxatives) if diet and lifestyle changes are not enough.

- Laxatives are medications that help you have a bowel movement.
- There are different types of laxatives, and they work in different ways. Talk to your healthcare team about which laxative may be right for you.

Fibre

What is dietary fibre?

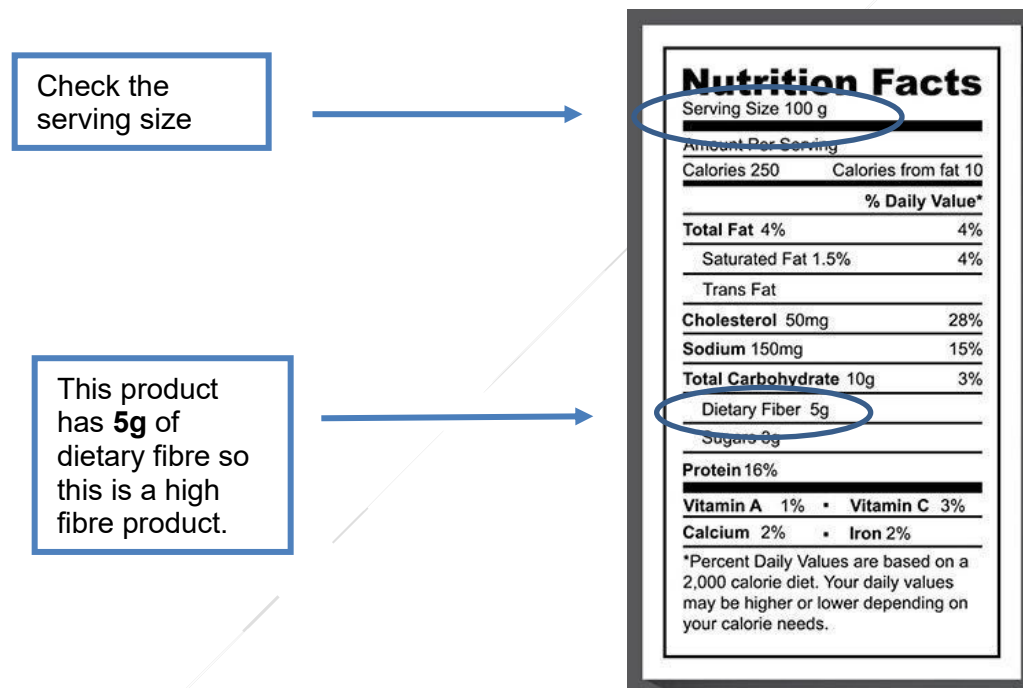
Fibre is the part of plant foods that our bodies cannot fully digest. Fibre can help to manage constipation by making our stool (poo) soft and easy to pass.

Fibre Recommendations

Age	Female (grams per day)	Male (grams per day)
19 to 50 years	25 g	38 g
Over 50 years	21 g	30 g

How to Use the Nutrition Facts Table

- Choose **2 grams** or more of fibre per serving.
- Use the % Daily Value (DV) in the Nutrition Facts Label:
 - 5% DV or less is a little fibre and 15% DV or more is a lot of fibre.



Ask to talk to a registered dietitian in the cancer centre if you have any questions or concerns about the information in this handout.

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