

Postoperative Constipation

SUNA Postoperative Care Task Force

Overview

Constipation occurs when bowel movements become less frequent, and stools become difficult to pass.

Indications

Having received anesthesia and narcotics, changes in your diet and drinking fluids, and less physical activity may lead to constipation.

Recommendations

Managing constipation is important but preventing it is better. Do not wait until severely constipated to try suggestions.

Take a stool softener and/or laxative that works for you. Suggestions include Colace, Senna, and Miralax. These medications are available over the counter. You may also use suppositories if needed.

- Increase your drinking of water.
- Increase your eating of fiber (Metamucil, etc.).
- Increase your activity level.

Colace: This is a stool softener that makes stool easier to pass. You can start taking 100 mg 2 times a day (morning and night) and may increase to a 200 mg 2 times a day as needed. This medication is not habit forming but may cause cramping.

Senna: This is a medication that loosens stools and increases bowel movements (laxative). You can take 1 tablet daily or 1 tablet 2 times a day as needed.

Miralax (polyethylene glycol 3350): This is a medication that loosens stools and increases bowel movements. It does this by working with the water in your body to pull water into your intestines, and helps your stool move along the intestinal path. You can start with 1 capful a day as needed. You may decrease to a half capful if needed.

****If relief of constipation is not successful, and you are unable to reach the clinic, please proceed to the nearest Emergency Department.**

Resources

- Crockett, S.D., Greer, K.B., Heidelbaugh, J.J., Falck-Ytter, Y., Hanson, B.J., & Sultan, S. (2019). American Gastroenterological Association Institute guideline on the medical management of opioid-induced constipation. *Gastroenterology*, 156(1), 218-226. <https://doi.org/10.1053/j.gastro.2018.07.016>
- Trads, M., Deutch, S.R., & Pedersen, P.U. (2017). Supporting patients in reducing postoperative constipation: Fundamental nursing care – A quasi-experimental study. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 32(2), 824-832. <https://doi.org/10.1111/scs.12513>
- Yue, C., Liu, Y., Zhang, X., Xu, B., & Sheng, H. (2020). Randomised controlled trial of a comprehensive protocol for preventing constipation following total hip arthroplasty. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 29(15-16), 2863-2871. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15299>

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Michele Boyd, MSN, RN, NPD-BC
Lynn Huck, ANP
Christopher T. Tucci, MS, RN, BC, CURN, NE-BC, FAUNA
Gwendolyn Hooper, PhD, APRN, CUNP
Anthony R. Lutz, MSN, NP-C, CUNP
Margaret (Amy) Hull, DNP WHNP-BC
Annemarie Dowling-Castronovo, PhD, RN, GNP-BC, ACHPN
Lais Heideman, RN, CURN
Susanne A. Quallich, PhD, ANP-BC, NP-C, CUNP, FAUNA, FAANP
Michelle J. Lajiness, FNP-BC, FAUNA
Marc M. Crisenbery, MSN, APRN, FNP-BC

We hope you and all your family members may benefit from these handouts.

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