
HNA Prompt Sheet: Constipation

Normal bowel function varies from person to person with a frequency of bowel movements ranging from once every three days to three times a day. Constipation describes a change from the normal bowel movement pattern with an unusually slow bowel habit where the bowel motion is often hard, dry and difficult to pass. If constipation becomes chronic and/or severe, it can lead to faecal impaction, which can progress to episodes of bowel obstruction. Sometimes, severe constipation can result in increased attempts to open the bowels and the passing of small amounts of liquid stool. This is also known as overflow diarrhoea.

Medical and/or radiological examination may be needed particularly when associated with pain, bleeding or other symptoms such as vomiting, to exclude mechanical and functional causes. As people with cancer can have constipation for a number of reasons, including the cancer itself or cancer treatments; careful assessment is essential.

Have you considered?

Whether the following are possible contributing factors:

- Low levels of fibre in the diet
- Daily fluid intake
- Low activity levels
- Other medical condition for example Parkinson's disease, diabetes, hypercalcaemia, multiple sclerosis, hormonal conditions including hypothyroidism, dementia, CVA
- Behavioural factors, such as ignoring the call to defaecate
- Emotional factors, such as anxiety and depression
- Current medication such as opioids, antidepressants, diuretics, antispasmodics, anticonvulsants and aluminum antacids or nifedipine/verapamil

Whether the following may help:

- Suggesting sitting in a squatting position on the toilet, with the knees bent and the feet raised on a low box so that the knees are positioned higher than the hip
- Prescribing a stool bulking agent or stool softeners (for hard faeces that are difficult to pass)

Services which may help

- Women's/men's health physiotherapist
- Pharmacist who can advise on appropriate laxative use

Patient information

British Nutrition Foundation: <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/>

Bowel Cancer UK: www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk/yourdiet

The IBS Network: <http://www.theibsnetwork.org/what-is-ibs/>