

## Constipation After Your Operation

### *Why it happens and what you can do*

*This handout explains why it is common to become constipated after surgery, and offers helpful tips to decrease constipation.*

### **What is constipation?**

Constipation is when your bowels move less often and your stools are more firm. Symptoms include abdominal discomfort, bloating, swelling, and having to strain when having a bowel movement.

It is common to become constipated after having surgery. This can cause discomfort until you get back to your regular schedule.

### **What causes constipation after surgery?**

Your digestion may work more slowly and you can get constipated when:

- There are changes in your usual eating habits
- You are taking prescription pain medicines
- You are not as active as usual

### **Tips to Decrease Constipation**

- **Take the stool softener** that your doctor prescribed. This is usually docusate (Colace).
- **Increase how much liquid you drink.** This helps keep your stools soft. Drink 6 to 8 glasses (8 ounces each) of water every day. This is besides the other liquids you drink with your meals.

You are **not** drinking enough if:

- The amount that you urinate is less than normal
- Your urine is dark-colored and strong-smelling
- You feel dizzy when you stand up



*Please call to talk with a nurse if you have any questions or concerns about your self-care at home.*

- **Eat foods that are high in fiber.** The easiest way to get fiber is by eating breakfast cereal. Look for brands with 5 grams or more fiber per serving. Fiber content is listed with the nutrition information on the side of the cereal box. Some high-fiber cereals include Spoon Size Shredded Wheat, All-Bran, and Oat Bran.

These foods are also high in fiber: dry and unsalted peanuts, whole wheat bread, other whole-grain products, parsnips, grapefruit, cantaloupe, cooked carrots, prunes, peas, baked beans, kidney and other beans, lentils, and split peas.

- **Try to have meals, especially breakfast, at the same time each day.** This helps get your bowels back on a regular schedule.
- **If your doctor says it is OK for you to drink coffee, have some at breakfast.** Coffee helps move your bowels. Decaf coffee works, too.
- **Drink prune juice** (cold or warm) at breakfast.
- **Walk or do other exercise after breakfast** to help food move through your intestines.
- **If you feel the urge, try to go.** Most people feel the urge to have a bowel movement about 20 minutes after a meal.
- **Do not just sit on the toilet and read.** Sitting on the toilet for a long time can cause painful swelling or hemorrhoids. Wait until you feel the urge to have a bowel movement, then sit on the toilet.

## Laxatives

Sometimes after an operation, a laxative can help your bowels start to move. You can buy these medicines without a prescription (“over the counter”) at any drugstore:

- **Milk of Magnesia liquid:** Works overnight.
- **Biscodyl rectal suppositories:** Work in about 20 minutes.
- **Fleets enema:** Works in about 15 minutes.

If you have used a different laxative before and it worked well, ask your nurse if it’s a good idea to use it again.

## When to Call

Call one of the numbers in the “Questions” box at left if you:

- Are having a lot fewer bowel movements than what is normal for you
- Are sick to your stomach and throwing up
- Feel dizzy or lightheaded when you stand up

## Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

On weekdays, call:

- ☐ **UWMC Surgical Specialties Center,** 206.598.4477 (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.)
- ☐ **UWMC 8-Southeast Oncology Unit,** 206.598.8300 (8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.)
- ☐ **UW Sports Medicine Center at Husky Stadium,** 206.598.DAWG (3294) and press 8

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the resident on call for Surgery to be paged.

Or, ask for your doctor to be paged:

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