

A guide for patients with chronic pain about managing constipation

This leaflet is aimed at managing constipation in patients who have persistent pain. You are not alone. In a survey, 44.3 per cent of patients who suffer from chronic pain felt they had a problem with constipation.

What is constipation?

Constipation is common. Although you may think it is having no bowel action, constipation actually means passing a hard stool less frequently than your usual bowel pattern. Regular motions are different for each person. Constipation can affect your quality of life and may affect your wellbeing, if not managed early enough.

Why do so many pain people have constipation?

There are many reasons why people in pain experience constipation, such as reduced mobility, changes in appetite, low mood or depression, other health conditions and certain medications. As we get older, the likelihood of constipation also increases.

Painkillers, such as opioids, for example, codeine and morphine, slow the bowel, making it difficult to pass a motion. Other medicines used in pain management, such as anti-depressants, for example, amitriptyline and duloxetine can also contribute to constipation. This means your stools can be hard and difficult to pass.

What can I do to help?

Diet and fluids

Under normal circumstances, a balanced diet with plenty of fibre will help to prevent constipation as long as you drink enough fluid. If you feel your food lacks fibre, increasing your intake of fruit and vegetables (soluble fibre) rather than cereals (insoluble fibre) can be helpful as these usually cause less bloating.

Aim to drink two litres of water a day. That's seven to eight glasses. Eating regularly, especially breakfast, is a natural stimulant for your bowels.

Routine

It is best to establish a regular bowel habit. The bowel is most likely to work on waking or 30 minutes after eating. It is important to set aside time in the toilet, preferably 10 minutes at a time when you are not rushing, ideally after breakfast.

Activity

Keeping active is one of the best ways to reduce constipation.

Laxatives

Regular laxatives are often needed when pain medication is taken. Laxatives can be thought of as **softeners**; they help soften hard stools and **stimulants**, which will help the bowel muscle work. In most cases where pain medication is concerned, a combination of the two is needed. If you are pregnant, please seek advice from your GP.

If you feel you need a **softener**, try **lactulose** or **docusate sodium**. Follow the recommended dose and advice.

If you feel you need a **stimulant** try **senna**, usually at night, or **bisocodyl** can be helpful. Follow the recommended dose and advice.



A **softener and a stimulant** are often needed together. You may need to take a combination of the above. You may need to adjust the dosage to keep regular and comfortable. Senna and docusate sodium have been found to be effective in combination, particularly as we get older or while we are on painkillers.

There are other laxatives called macrogols, which act as a softener and a stimulant. Examples of these are **laxido** and **movicol**. These are available from your pharmacist. Please discuss this with your GP first, especially if you have any other medical conditions and you require regular laxatives.

There is alternative medication available. Please ask your local pharmacist or GP for further advice about this if you feel you need to.

Don't wait to become constipated. If you are taking regular opioids, such as morphine, then take laxatives daily to achieve a comfortable motion. The dose needed will vary for each person.

We strongly advise you to read and follow all the instructions given in the leaflets provided with each medication.

For further information

If you have any questions after reading this leaflet please contact the Community Pain Service:

Phone: 0300 123 1753

Address: St Augustine's Business Centre, 125 Canterbury Road, Westgate-on-Sea, Kent CT8 8NL

Useful websites

Patient.co.uk

www.patient.co.uk/health/constipation-in-adults-leaflet

This leaflet has been produced in conjunction with East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust.

Customer Care Team

If you have a query about our health services, or would like to comment, compliment or complain about Kent Community Health NHS Trust, you can contact the **Customer Care Team**.

Phone: 0300 123 1807, 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Please ask if you would like the team to call you back

Text: 07943 091958 **Email:** kcht.cct@nhs.net

Address: Customer Care Team, Kent Community Health NHS Trust, Trinity House, 110-120 Upper Pemberton, Eureka Park, Ashford, Kent, TN25 4AZ **Web:** www.kentcht.nhs.uk

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You will be asked for your agreement to treatment and, if necessary, your permission to share your personal information.

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