

Diarrhoea and constipation

Disclaimer: This fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for your child.

Diarrhoea and constipation are common problems in children receiving cancer treatment. This information sheet is provided to help you understand the cause and treatment for constipation and diarrhoea.

Diarrhoea (loose bowel movements)

What causes Diarrhoea?

There are many reasons why your child might get diarrhoea. Chemotherapy, antibiotics, mucositis, increased sensitivity to foods or even normal childhood illnesses can all cause diarrhoea.

What can parents do?

- Make sure your child is drinking plenty of fluids as there is often a large amount of fluid lost from the body with diarrhoea.
- Babies should continue to drink milk. Older children should drink water, diluted fruit juices, rehydration fluids (such as Gastrolyte) or diluted soft drinks.
- Give your child very plain and simple foods, which are low in fat and sugar, until it settles.
- Make sure everyone in the house washes their hands well in case the diarrhoea is catching!

How do you treat diarrhoea?

In most cases, diarrhoea lasts only a few days. If a child cannot drink enough fluids and becomes dehydrated, they may need intravenous fluids. Some medicines can decrease the amount of diarrhoea, but these are not often used, as they can cause constipation. Use these only under the direction of the oncology team.

Do I need to tell anyone if my child has diarrhoea?

Occasionally, diarrhoea may be a sign of serious infections, even without fever. Please phone the staff if you are worried about your child's diarrhoea, or if it doesn't go away quickly. If your child gets diarrhoea before or during a routine admission please tell the staff so we can protect you and others from potential infection.

Constipation (hard bowel movements)

What causes constipation?

Constipation can be a side effect of medicines (especially vincristine and some pain medications). It can also be due to changes in diet, especially if your child sick and eating or drinking less than usual.

How do I know if my child is constipated?

You may notice that your child is not opening his/her bowels as often as normal. The motions may be hard. Your child may have difficulty going to the toilet, with pain or having to push hard (strain). Some children complain of pain in their stomach, or have less appetite than usual. You should ask your child to tell you if they are finding it hard to go to the toilet.

How do we treat constipation?

Your child may need some medicines (laxatives or aperients) to treat the constipation. Some children take these regularly to prevent constipation. Others only take these when they become constipated. **We do not usually** use enemas or suppositories to treat constipation because infection might be introduced into the back passage (anus) when these are used. The oncology team will suggest some gentle oral medicines to treat the problem.

What can we do to prevent constipation?

- Make sure your child is drinking plenty of fluids.
- Increase the fibre content of your child's diet by encouraging wholegrain cereal products, fruit, vegetables and nuts.
- Administer laxative medicines as directed by the team.
- Tell the oncology team if you are worried that your child may be getting constipated.

Preventing constipation is very important if your child is receiving an intensive chemotherapy protocol. Hard bowel movements can cause a tear in the anal canal (back passage) which may be painful, slow to heal and can be a site of entry of bacteria into the bloodstream. This may result in serious, even life-threatening, infections.

If constipation or diarrhoea are a problem for your child at home we would like you to let us know so we can help you manage it.

Any questions about this information may be directed to the Oncology Treatment Centre on 9845 2115 (8am-4pm) or Camperdown ward on 9845 1123. Further sheets are available from the Oncology staff or The Children's Hospital at Westmead's website at www.chw.edu.au. Updated **April 2003**.

the children's hospital at Westmead