

Preventing Constipation from Pain Medicines

Constipation

When your bowel movements are difficult or don't happen often, you have constipation. It is a common side effect of many pain medicines, including the following:

- Hydrocodone – in Lortab®, Norco®, or Vicodin®
- Oxycodone – in Oxycontin or Percocet
- Morphine
- Fentanyl patches

If you take one or more of these for pain, it is a good idea to take medicines that help prevent constipation.

Before you start taking pain medicine, talk to your doctor if you haven't had a bowel movement in more than five days. Also tell your doctor if you have nausea, vomiting, or very hard stool.

Medicines

There are two kinds of constipation medicines: stool softeners and laxatives. Stool softeners keep water in your colon, creating softer stools. Laxatives help move stool through your body.

Sennosides and docusate. Many medicines that help with constipation have ingredients called sennosides, or senna, and docusate in them. Sennosides are laxatives and docusate is a stool softener. Many products combine sennosides and docusate in one pill.

Polyethylene glycol. Medicines containing polyethylene glycol are potent stool softeners.

The column at the right has more information about constipation medicines and common brand names.

Finding the Right Dose

The amount of constipation medicine to take varies from person to person. Keep a record of your bowel movements and dosage of constipation medicine you have taken to learn what works best for you. If your pain medicine dose changes, you will probably also need to adjust your dose of constipation medicine.

Sennosides and Docusate. Start with a dose of 8.6 mg sennosides and between 50 mg and 100 mg of docusate. Take this amount once or twice a day. You may feel the effects after one to four doses. The goal is to have a normal, comfortable bowel movement at least every other day.

If you don't have a bowel movement by the end of the second day, increase your bedtime dose by one pill. If you still don't have a bowel movement, increase the morning dose by one pill the next day. If you don't have a bowel movement in more than five days or have nausea, vomiting, or very hard stool, call your doctor.

Polyethylene Glycol. If medicine with sennosides and docusate doesn't work for you, take 17 g (about ¼ level teaspoons) of polyethylene glycol dissolved in a cup of juice or water. The bottle cap may be marked at 17 g so you can use it to measure.

Some people find that polyethylene glycol works better for them than sennosides and docusate.

At your next appointment, it is important to tell your doctor what constipation medicine you are taking and the dose.

Constipation Medicines

These constipation medicines are available at the Huntsman Cancer Institute Outpatient Pharmacy.

- Senna-S (8.6 mg sennosides, 50 mg docusate)
- Senna (8.6 mg sennosides)
- Docusate (100 mg)
- Senna - liquid form (8.8 mg/5 ml)
- Docusate - liquid form (50 mg/5 ml)
- MiraLax® (17 g polyethylene glycol)
- Polyethylene glycol (17 g)

The following brand name constipation medicines may be available at your local drug store.

- Colace® (100 mg docusate)
- Dulcoease® (100 mg docusate)
- Ex-Lax Regular Strength® (15 mg sennosides)
- Fleet Sof-Lax® (100 mg docusate)
- Phillips Liqui-Gels® (100 mg docusate)
- Peri-Colace® (8.6 mg sennosides, 50 mg docusate)

- Senna Lax® (8.6 mg sennosides, 50 mg docusate)
- Senokot-S® (8.6 mg sennosides, 50 mg docusate)

Note: Before buying a constipation medicine, read the product label. The medicine and dose may vary by brand name. Avoid products with bisacodyl or casanthranol (cascara). They may cause cramping. Some Dulcolax products with senna and docusate also contain bisacodyl.