

Taking Care of Constipation for Patients in Long-Term Care

What is constipation?

Everyone can have trouble having a bowel movement from time to time. But chronic constipation – trouble passing stools and not having bowel movements very often – can last weeks, or even longer. Sometimes constipation is caused by another health problem or by a medication. Other times, there isn't any obvious cause. The way constipation feels can be very unpleasant, with cramps, straining to have a bowel movement, the feeling that you can't empty your bowels, and hard stools. These symptoms can make it hard to enjoy your daily life.

How is constipation treated?

There are many different ways to treat constipation. Changes to your diet and how much physical activity you are getting may help, but sometimes medication is needed. There are many different medications available to treat constipation. In the past, people living in long-term care facilities were often given stool softeners to prevent and treat constipation – but this treatment is no longer recommended.

Why am I no longer taking stool softeners?

Stool softeners have been commonly used to treat constipation. But a recent look at medical studies on people in long-term care, or people taking painkillers called opiates, showed that stool softeners didn't help to prevent or treat their constipation. Stools softeners didn't increase their number of bowel movements, and they didn't improve the symptoms of constipation, either. Because there is no evidence showing that stool softeners work, it is no longer recommend that you take this medication.

How will we treat my constipation now?

Fortunately, there are many other treatments for constipation that are effective. Some of these work by making your stool bulkier and easier to pass. Others work by stimulating your bowels to move. Some draw water into your bowel, making it easier for you to pass stools. Still others lubricate your bowel so that stool moves more easily through them. These medications come in many different forms: pills, liquids, powders, suppositories (which are inserted into the rectum), and enemas (fluid inserted through the rectum).

Your health care team will help you to decide whether a different treatment for constipation is needed, and to choose a treatment that is right for you.

Your new recommended treatment plan for constipation is: _____

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