Using Medicine to Prevent Constipation From Pain Medication

Patient Education

Constipation

Constipation is when bowel movements become difficult or less frequent. It is a common side effect of pain medicines such as hydrocodone (found in Lortab or Vicodin), oxycodone (found in Oxycontin or Percocet), morphine, and fentanyl patches. If you are taking any of these medicines, it is a good idea to take drugs 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 or 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 along the intestines.

Sennosides and Docusate

Many medicines that help with constipation have ingredients called sennosides (also called senna) and docusate (brand name Colace) in them. Sennosides are laxatives and docusate is a stool softener. There are many products that combine sennosides and docusate in one pill.

Polyethylene Glycol

Medicines containing polyethylene glycol (brand name MiraLax) are potent stool softeners.

For more information about constipation medicines, see the box below.

Finding the Right Dose

The amount of constipation medicine to take varies from person to person. Keeping a diary of your bowel movements and dosage of constipation medicine may help you determine what works best for you. If your pain medicine dose changes, you will likely 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. You can take one to four doses and you can take this amount once or twice a day. The goal is to have a normal, comfortable, regular 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. If you still don't have a bowel movement, increase the morning dose 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 one capful of polyethylene glycol in a cup of juice or water.

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 Huntsman Cancer Institute Outpatient Pharmacy.

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

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 purchasing a constipation medicine, read the product label. The medicine and dose may vary by brand name. Avoid products with bisacodyl or casanthranol (cascara) as they may cause cramping. Some Dulcolax products have senna and docusate, but often have bisacodyl as well.