

Laxatives (Bowel Medications)

What is happening

Constipation is very common in people with serious illness.

It is especially likely when taking **pain medications (opioids)**, which slow the bowels.

Preventing constipation is important for comfort and overall well-being.

How these medications help

Laxatives help the body:

- Move stool through the intestines
- Prevent or relieve constipation

If opioids are being used, a **laxative is usually needed every day** to prevent constipation.

Do not use laxatives if the patient is having diarrhea.

Common medications

- Miralax (polyethylene glycol)
- Senna / Senokot
- Dulcolax (tablet or suppository)

Most of these are available **over the counter**.

What you may see (causes of constipation)

Constipation can be worsened by:

- Pain medications (opioids)
- Being in bed or less active
- Changes in diet or reduced intake

How to give these medications

- Most laxatives are taken **by mouth**
- Dulcolax suppositories are given **rectally**

Follow:

- Package instructions for over-the-counter medications

- Or directions from your hospice team

When it should work

- Some laxatives may begin working within **about an hour or longer**
- Others may take more time depending on the type

Possible side effects

These medications are generally well tolerated, but may cause:

- Cramping or abdominal discomfort
- Frequent bowel movements
- Diarrhea

What you can do

- Give laxatives as directed, especially if opioids are being used
- Monitor bowel movements regularly
- Encourage fluids if appropriate and allowed
- Contact the hospice team with concerns rather than adjusting medications on your own

When to call hospice

- Moderate or severe abdominal pain
- No bowel movement after a second dose
- Rectal bleeding seen in the toilet
- Ongoing diarrhea or frequent loose stools
- Any uncertainty about what to give or when