

# Constipation

## What is happening

Constipation means:

- Bowel movements becoming less frequent
- Stool becoming harder or more difficult to pass

Constipation is very common in serious illness and especially common in hospice patients.

Without treatment, constipation can become severe and very uncomfortable.

## Why constipation happens

Common causes include:

- Less physical activity
- Eating and drinking less
- Changes in diet
- Medications

Opioid pain medications are one of the most common causes of constipation.

## What you may see

- Fewer bowel movements
- Hard or difficult-to-pass stools
- Abdominal discomfort or cramping
- Fullness or pressure in the rectal area
- Straining during bowel movements

In patients with dementia, constipation may appear as:

- Increased confusion
- Restlessness or agitation

Sometimes severe constipation can cause:

- Small amounts of loose or liquid stool leaking around a blockage (“overflow diarrhea”)

## What you can do

- Encourage fluids if safe and tolerated
- Encourage movement or activity if able
- Use laxatives provided or recommended by the hospice team

It is not necessary to have a bowel movement every day, but bowel movements should not be:

- Painful
- Hard
- Difficult to pass

### **Important opioid reminder**

If opioid pain medications are being used:

- A laxative should usually be taken regularly
- Unless the hospice team advises otherwise

Preventing constipation is easier than treating severe constipation later.

### **When to call hospice**

- No bowel movement for more than 2 days
- Increasing abdominal pain or discomfort
- Blood in the stool
- Increasing agitation or confusion
- Vomiting or inability to eat
- You are unsure what medication or laxative to use