

Helping Her
Manage:

**Bowel
Problems**

NOT SURE IF IT'S A MEDICAL EMERGENCY? STOP and CALL

Severe diarrhea is a serious condition that requires urgent attention. **Call your Cancer Care Provider right away** if your loved one develops any of the following symptoms along with diarrhea:

- Fever (temperature of 100.5F or 38C)
- 6 or more loose bowel movements a day for more than 2 days
- Dizziness, weakness, disorientation or confusion
- Palpitations (a rapid and irregular heart beat)
- Abdominal cramps that last more than a day
- Bloody stool

A **bowel obstruction** is a medical emergency. **Call your Cancer Care Provider right away** if your loved one begins vomiting and has not had a bowel movement in 3 or more days.

This guide will help you to:

- Understand important bowel management concerns, including Constipation, Diarrhea, and Bowel Control problems.
- Identify how bowel problems may be affecting your loved one and you as her caregiver.
- Develop individualized strategies to help manage these symptoms better.

Bowel problems are very common for those with gynecologic cancer, and need to be taken seriously.

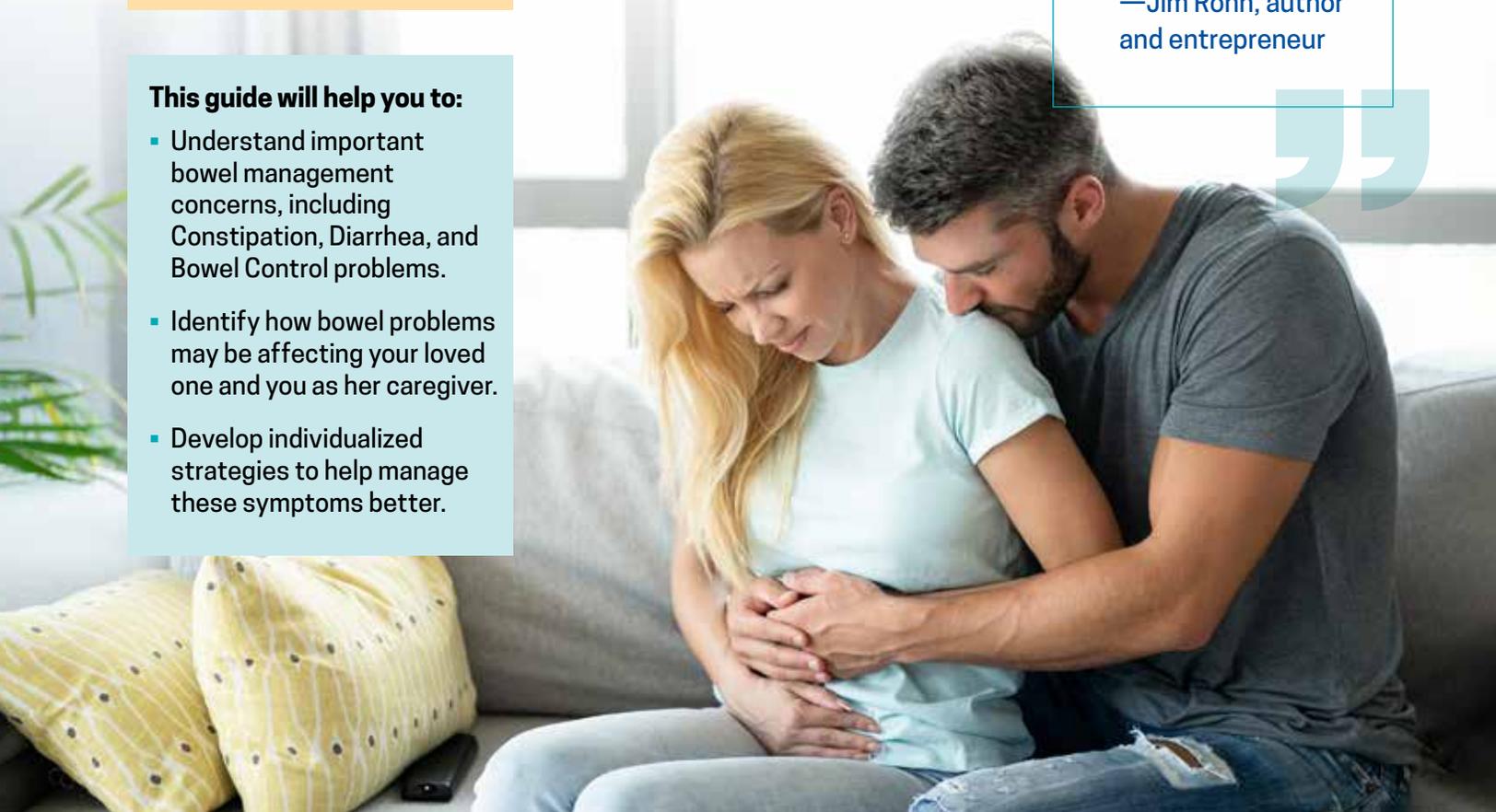
Cancer and its treatment can lead to changes in bowel function for women with gynecologic cancer. They may experience constipation, diarrhea, and/or bowel control problems, such as incontinence and difficulty using the toilet. It's possible to have more than one bowel issue at the same time, which can create a confusing and difficult-to-manage situation. These problems can interfere with daily function and may cause treatment delays.

Bowel habits are a private, personal function and this can sometimes be difficult to talk about with your loved one. You may feel awkward about bringing it up; or, your loved one may feel hesitant or embarrassed to tell you about problems or issues. However, it is important to report symptoms to your loved one's cancer care provider so that they can treat any bowel problems she may be having. Untreated bowel issues can sometimes lead to serious and even life-threatening health problems.

By learning the best ways to manage bowel problems, you can help your loved one stay safe and comfortable, and avoid situations that can affect her quality of life.

One person caring for another represents life's greatest value.

—Jim Rohn, author and entrepreneur



How Do Those with Gynecologic Cancer Describe Their Bowel Problems?

Below is a breakdown of common symptoms that your loved one may describe when dealing with constipation, diarrhea, or bowel control problems

What about you?

Check off any items that your loved one is experiencing. Write in anything else related to bowel problems that she may be going through.

Constipation

- Stools that are hard and dry, and difficult to pass
- Feeling like it is “not all out,” even with straining or pushing down
- Abdominal fullness and bloating, abdominal discomfort, cramping, or lower back pain
- Thin, pencil-like stools that alternate with diarrhea (this can be a sign of impaction)
- Hemorrhoids or anal fissures

Diarrhea

- 3 or more bowel movements a day
- Soft, loose, or watery stools
- Abdominal cramping, pain, and gas
- Sore, irritated skin in the rectal area
- An urgent need to use the bathroom
- Avoid leaving home in fear of having an accident

Bowel Control Problems

- Being unaware of the urge to go, and then being surprised and embarrassed when stool passes
- A strong, sudden urge but not enough control to stop a bowel movement
- Leaking small amounts of liquid or formed stool
- Feeling a loss of control over life
- Feeling a lowered sense of dignity and/or self-esteem

What Causes Bowel Problems?

Constipation

Constipation is a very common problem for those with gynecologic cancer. Untreated constipation can lead to an impaction (stool is stuck in the bowel), which can progress to a blockage (bowel obstruction) and damage to the bowel. ***This is a serious health condition that needs immediate medical attention.***

What causes constipation? If someone is constipated, waste is moving too slowly through the digestive tract. Several factors may contribute to your loved one's constipation, including:

- Not drinking enough fluids
- Dehydration from nausea and vomiting, or fever
- Physical inactivity, depression, anxiety, and stress
- Not eating enough high-fiber foods
- A diet high in constipating foods, such as cheese, candy, meat and poultry, and snack foods
- A change in routines or schedules
- Not allowing enough time in the bathroom or ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Needing to wait for assistance to get to the toilet
- Diabetes, thyroid disease, or other diseases

Medication and constipation. Certain chemotherapy drugs used to treat gynecologic cancer can lead to constipation, as well as these medicines used during treatment or to manage side effects, including:

- Anti-nausea medicines
- Opioid pain medicines
- Antidepressants
- Iron and calcium supplements
- Anticonvulsant medicines
- Antacids containing aluminum or calcium
- Diuretics (water pills)



Learn More

Just looking for strategies to manage constipation? Jump to **page 8:8**.



Diarrhea

Generally, when someone has diarrhea, food and fluids are moving through the intestines too fast and water and nutrients are not being absorbed into the body. **Severe diarrhea that lasts for several days or longer can lead to dehydration, fluid and electrolyte imbalance, and needs immediate medical attention.**

What causes diarrhea? There are many different causes of diarrhea. One cause could be chemotherapy, which kills cancer cells but can also damage the fast-growing cells in the entire gastrointestinal tract, leading to diarrhea. However, there are several other possible causes of diarrhea for those with gynecologic cancer:

- Other medicines, including anti-convulsants, antibiotics, acid reflux medicine, and laxatives
- Serious bowel infections that occur after taking antibiotics, or from contaminated food/water
- Food intolerances, including lactose intolerance
- A diet too high in fiber content, certain types of fruit juices (unfiltered prune or apple juice), high-fat foods, caffeine, alcohol, or foods that contain sorbitol ('sugar-free' gum or candies)
- Nutritional supplements with a high sugar content
- Stress and anxiety

Fecal impaction. Sometimes what appears to be diarrhea can be severe constipation or an impaction. In this case, liquid stool actually leaks around the hard stool impacted (stuck) in the bowel. **If your loved one is prone to constipation and has not had a bowel movement for more than 3 to 4 days before the diarrhea started, she may have an impaction and needs immediate medical attention.**

While the cause of your loved one's diarrhea may be complex, understanding it will help determine the right treatment. It is important to let her cancer care provider know if she is having diarrhea.



Helpful Tip:

Does your loved one have diarrhea? Follow these tips to keep her safe:

- ✓ Call her cancer care provider right away if she develops a fever with diarrhea.
- ✓ Never self-adjust the dosage or stop taking a medication without consulting her cancer care provider.
- ✓ Talk with her cancer care provider if she is taking supplements.



Learn More

Just looking for strategies to manage diarrhea? Jump to **page 8:11.**



Learn More

Just looking for strategies to manage bowel control problems? Jump to **page 8:13**.

Bowel Control Problems

Bowel control problems may present in different ways for individuals with gynecologic cancer. It may lead to a change in awareness of the need to have a bowel movement, or being unable to control or stop one from occurring. Your loved one may feel embarrassed and anxious about this problem. She may feel reluctant to talk about it with anyone and it may limit the time she spends outside the home.

What causes bowel control problems? Gynecologic cancer, surgery and treatments can cause muscle weakness and/or changes in sensation. This can lead to:

- Problems with the muscles that control the “squeeze pressure”
- Inability to feel the urge to have a bowel movement
- General weakness, making it difficult to get to the bathroom in time without assistance
- Not asking for help or using the toilet while others are present, due to embarrassment and a need for privacy
- Constipation, fecal impaction, or diarrhea can also make it difficult to control the bowels, as can a diet low in fiber and fluids.

Talk with your loved one’s cancer care provider if she is experiencing any of these issues. Understanding the cause of her bowel control problems will help you together find ways to manage and prevent it.

YOUR THOUGHTS

In what ways have bowel problems affected your loved one?

What are some of the biggest barriers to managing these problems?

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

Now, let's explore some strategies and ways to help you overcome these barriers.

Strategies for Preventing and Managing Bowel Problems

A goal to keep in mind throughout your time as a caregiver is to help your loved one *prevent* bowel problems before they start. Here, you can find strategies to help you both prevent problems and manage them if they develop. Be sure to discuss your loved one's bowel problems with her cancer care provider.



Learn More

You can read the whole guide or jump to information on a specific bowel problem.

Constipation
(page 8:8)

Diarrhea (page 8:11)

Bowel control problems
(page 8:13)

Constipation Prevention

These strategies can help to prevent constipation. Start by talking with your loved one's cancer care provider. **Remember, call right away if she has signs of fecal impaction.**

Drink plenty of fluids. Help your loved one drink a minimum of **6 cups** of fluid per day, with an ideal goal of **8 cups** (64 oz). Water is best—but she can also drink juice, carbonated drinks, tea, and even coffee. You may have heard that caffeinated drinks cause fluid loss, but this is minimal. If your loved one usually drinks caffeine without a problem, then she can benefit from drinking those fluids.

Focus on fiber. Eat foods high in dietary fiber (at least **20 to 35 grams** per day). Fiber acts like a sponge, absorbing water into the large intestine. This makes the stool softer and bulkier, so it can easily move through the bowel. Help your loved one get enough fiber each day with these tips:

- **Eat fiber-rich grains:** brown rice, whole wheat, barley, bran cereals, oat bran, oatmeal, soybeans.
- **Snack on nuts/seeds:** almonds, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, peanuts, pecans, and walnuts.
- **Eat 5 servings of fruits or veggies daily:** apples, berries, cherries, pears, asparagus, spinach, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and carrots are good choices. Choose fresh or dried fruits over juices.
- **Eat a variety of legumes:** beans, peas, and lentils.
- **Choose high-fiber cereals or snacks:** check the nutrition label for those with at least **5 grams** of fiber per serving.

Stick to a comfortable, daily routine. This will help to promote regularity. Some tips to try are:

- **Eat breakfast.** Include a hot drink to get the bowels moving.
- **Schedule daily bathroom time at the same time every day.** Try times when the bowel is normally most active—in the a.m. and 30 minutes after eating.
- **Exercise.** Daily physical activity can help relieve constipation. See the guide in **Helping Her Manage: A Healthy Lifestyle** this series for tips on helping your loved one exercise.



Helpful Tip:

Avoid adding a lot of fiber all of a sudden. Start small and increase the amount slowly over 3 to 4 weeks to give the digestive system time to adjust.

It's important to drink plenty of fluids when eating high-fiber foods. A high-fiber diet is not recommended for a person who is immobile or drinks less than 6 cups of fluid a day.

- **Don't wait to go.** Encourage your loved one to not put off a bowel movement when she feels the urge.
- **Create a comfortable environment.** Use a toilet or bedside commode. If a bedpan is necessary, help your loved one into an upright, back-supported position and provide as much privacy as possible.

Be proactive! If your loved one is about to start a treatment or new medicine that causes constipation, plan ahead to prevent it from occurring. For example, if you know that she was constipated for several days after her last chemotherapy treatment, talk with her cancer care provider about starting a bowel routine **prior** to each treatment.

Constipation Management

Prevention strategies alone may not be enough. If your loved one is already constipated, continue using the preventive strategies listed above and begin keeping a record or diary of daily bowel movements. This will help her cancer care provider determine possible causes of constipation and the best treatment.

Laxatives. Your loved one may need to use a laxative. “Laxative” broadly refers to any product used to stimulate a bowel movement or to loosen or soften the stool. Most types of laxatives are available over-the-counter, but the type that will work best depends on what is causing the constipation. Talk with your loved one’s cancer care provider before using any laxatives so that they can help you determine which one to use. Refer to the following chart for a quick breakdown of common laxatives:

PAB High-Fiber Jam

(Prune, applesauce, bran)

Try this recipe to add fiber to your loved one’s diet and help promote regular bowel movements. It can be eaten by itself or used as a jam:

- 1 part bran
- 2 parts prune juice
- 3 parts applesauce

Mix all ingredients together. Use 1/8 to 1/4 cup, one to two times daily. Increase or decrease as needed.

Note: Larger particle bran (wheat bran) has a greater effect on stool than smaller particle bran (finely-milled bran).



Types of Laxatives	Uses and Tips
Prunes/ Prune Juice (“natural laxative”)	Natural high-fiber food that works similarly to psyllium laxatives. Drink water when consuming dried fruit.
Stool softeners (emollients)	Absorbs water and makes stool more comfortable to pass, but does not promote bowel movements. Useful in preventing constipation.
Bulk-forming (“fiber supplements”)	Often the first choice to help prevent constipation. Absorbs water to add bulk which then stimulates the bowel and makes the stool softer. Must be taken with 8 to 10 oz. of water. (Not recommended for constipation caused by opioid pain medicines.)
Stimulants (Senna and Bisacodyl)	Causes rhythmic contractions in the intestines to promote bowel movements. May cause abdominal cramping. Best when taken at bedtime.
Saline or Osmotic	Draws water into colon for easier passage of stool. Should be used cautiously in people with kidney problems.
Lubricants (mineral oil, retention enemas)	Greases the stool to make it pass more easily. May block the absorption of some nutrients from food. Best to avoid. Always talk with cancer care provider before use.
Combinations	Constipation caused by the chemotherapy drugs or opioid pain medicines can be treated with a combination of stimulants and softeners.
Senna Tea	Stimulates bowel movement. Boil 1 oz. of senna leaves in 1 quart of water. Strain and drink tea as needed. Start with small amounts until you know how it works for you.



Talk with your loved one's Cancer Care Provider if she is not getting relief from these approaches.

Prescription laxatives. Ask your loved one's cancer care provider about types of prescription medicines that can be used for constipation related to opioid pain medicine. Bear in mind, using laxatives to maintain regular bowel function after surgery or while receiving chemotherapy treatment **will not** cause laxative dependence.

Figuring out a laxative program for constipation may take some adjustments in dose and timing to reach the best balance for your loved one. Hang in there!

Complementary and Integrative Approaches. These types of therapies can be used alongside the standard medical care your loved one receives:

- **Abdominal massage.** This may help by stimulating the bowel muscles. It can also help reduce the pain and discomfort that comes with constipation.
- **Herbs.** Due to limited research, herbs are not currently recommended. If interested in trying herbal preparations, you can ask your cancer care provider to recommend a complementary and integrative medicine professional in your hospital or cancer center to help you.

Diarrhea Prevention

These strategies can be used to help prevent diarrhea.

If she has symptoms of severe diarrhea, call her cancer care provider right away.

Low-fiber diet. If your loved one will be starting a treatment that often causes diarrhea, she should begin a low-residue (low-fiber) diet at the same time.

Psyllium (Metamucil®). This has been shown to prevent diarrhea for some people. Drink at least 8 oz. of water when taking and be aware that it can cause bloating. Ask your loved one's cancer care provider before using.

Probiotics. These live organisms help maintain the natural balance in the gut and aid in digestion. Several clinical trials are currently testing probiotic treatments; they may be especially beneficial for diarrhea related to the use of antibiotics. You can try foods or supplements that contain the bacteria *Lactobacillus* or yeast *S. boulardii*, for example. Talk with your loved one's cancer care provider before trying one of these products and avoid using them altogether if she has a weakened immune system.



Definition:

Low-residue diet

Another word commonly used for a low-fiber diet.

Diarrhea Management

If your loved one experiences diarrhea, it's important to understand the cause in order to best manage it. Talk with her cancer care provider to determine the proper course of treatment and follow these general tips:

Replace lost fluids. No matter what the cause or treatment, it is critical to drink fluids. Adequate hydration won't stop diarrhea but will help replace needed fluids. Drink **3 or more liters** (or 12, 8 oz. cups) of fluid per day (as long as your loved one has no kidney problems or congestive heart failure). Some suggestions are:

- Take frequent drinks in small amounts, every 10 to 15 minutes.
- Sip from a large water bottle throughout the day.
- Try low-calorie, low-sugar sports drinks or Pedialyte® to replace lost electrolytes.
- Kool-Aid, cranberry juice, broth, and weak decaffeinated teas are also options.
- Drink fluids at room temperature.
- Avoid caffeinated coffee/tea and alcohol.
- Avoid red-colored drinks, which can confuse or hide signs of bleeding in the stool.

Start a low-residue, low-fiber diet. These foods reduce the number of bowel movements your loved one will have.

- Choose bland foods that are easiest to digest. Follow the *BRAT diet* until symptoms improve:
Bananas - **R**ice - **A**pplesauce - **T**oast
- No dairy products, or spicy, acidic, or fried foods.
- No high-fiber foods, such as raw fruits and vegetables, skins (potato, apple), seeds and legumes, broccoli and cauliflower.
- No sugar-free gum and candy with sorbitol.
- Eat small, frequent meals rather than large meals, and rest after eating.
- Nibble salty foods like pretzels or saltines.

After your loved one is diarrhea-free for **24 hours**, slowly add foods back into her diet. Add plain or low-sugar yogurts if recommended by your cancer care provider (yogurts are a type of probiotic).



Helpful Tip:

Make your own fluid replacement solution.
Mix together:

- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tbsp. corn syrup
- 6 oz. frozen orange juice concentrate
- 6 cups water



Helpful Tip:

Handle your loved one's soiled laundry with care during chemotherapy.

The waste may contain the chemotherapy your loved one is taking, especially within 48 hours after treatment. When handling soiled laundry and cleaning the bathroom:

- Wear gloves
- Wash soiled laundry separate from other laundry
- Place soiled laundry in a leak-proof plastic bag if unable to wash immediately
- Place adult diapers in biohazard waste containers
- Flush the toilet twice with each bowel movement for the first 48 hours after treatment

Medicines for managing treatment-related

diarrhea. Usually, management of treatment-related diarrhea includes a low-residue diet and the use of anti-diarrhea medicines, such as loperamide (IMODIUM®). If your loved one is more prone to constipation, use these medicines carefully to avoid causing constipation. Check with her cancer team before starting any over-the-counter medication. Avoid herbal supplements such as milk thistle, cayenne, and ginseng. There is no evidence that these help diarrhea.

Practice good skin care. To prevent sores and pain around the rectal area, wash with mild soap and warm water after each loose bowel movement and then pat dry. Apply an over-the-counter barrier cream (A&D ointment or zinc oxide). If needed, ask your loved one's cancer care provider if it is okay to use a numbing ointment for sore areas.

Bowel Control Prevention and Management

Follow these tips to help your loved one prevent and manage bowel control problems:

Keep a record or symptom diary. Understanding the cause of your loved one's bowel control problems is the first step in helping her. Work with your loved one to record the timing of her bowel movements and anything related to loss of control. Share this info with her cancer care provider.

Diet and physical activity. Encourage your loved one to eat a diet that promotes normal bowel habits and avoids constipation and/or diarrhea. Remember to include fiber (but not too much), drink plenty of fluids, and avoid caffeine. It's also important to encourage your loved one to stay as physically active as she can.

Bowel training. A good routine or schedule can help your loved one maintain normal bowel habits. This is called *bowel training*. Here are some tips that can help her:

- Leave enough time to use the toilet and use it the same time every day.
- Plan to use the toilet 15 to 30 minutes after meals, especially after breakfast.
- Provide privacy, but stay close by if that helps your loved one feel safe.
- Use the toilet before leaving home. Locate public restrooms ahead of time if you will be away.

What if your loved one has difficulty getting to or using the toilet or bathroom? Try these strategies:

- Make sure the path to the bathroom and toilet are well lit and clear of any physical obstacles.
- Make sure the toilet is comfortable and the correct height. Add grab bars if needed to help your loved one feel safe.
- Try placing a commode in another room.
- Help your loved one select clothes that are easy to get on and off, such as loose-fitting pants with an elastic waistband.

Therapies: Pelvic Floor Exercises (Kegel). These types of exercises can strengthen the muscles that control the rectum and rectal sphincter (anus). They can be done discreetly anywhere and at any time. Check reputable resources, such as the Mayo Clinic, for instructions on how to properly do Kegel exercises (www.mayoclinic.org).

Strategies for Incontinence. If your loved one is incontinent, follow these practices:

- Help her change clothing if needed.
- Help her wash with mild soap and warm water. Pre-moistened, alcohol-free towelettes or wipes may be easier, especially when away from home.
- Dry skin carefully before getting dressed again.
- Use a barrier cream to protect skin, such as zinc oxide or A&D ointment.
- Consider using an incontinence product, such as a liner or disposable underwear.

Try to be sensitive to how your loved one feels about “accidents.” Problems with fecal incontinence can lead to social isolation and cause feelings of depression and anxiety. Planning ahead can help you and your loved one feel more confident.

- Carry clean-up supplies, pads, and a change of clothing with you when you leave home.
- Pack a small bag that you can keep in the car.
- Be patient and try to give your loved one the time she needs.
- Aim to set aside personal feelings about helping with these tasks.



Helpful Tip:

Visit the Mayo Clinic at www.mayoclinic.org to learn how to do Kegel exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles.



“It’s hard to get out of the house when I feel the need to stay near a bathroom just in case.”



How to Talk with Others About Your Loved One's Bowel Problems



Help your loved one keep track of bowel movements and symptoms by recording them or keeping a symptom diary. Share this information with her cancer care provider.

Keep a record or symptom diary of your loved one's constipation, diarrhea, or bowel control problems. A symptom diary is a good way to keep track of bowel movements and to share this information with her cancer care provider. This can help them to identify the cause and best treatment for her bowel problems.

Be sure to also talk with your loved one's cancer care provider about your concerns. Questions you might consider asking include:

- *What factors could make the bowel problem worse?*
- *What treatments are available to help my loved one with her bowel problem?*
- *How long will the bowel problem last?*
- *Would a referral to a nutritionist or behavioral therapist be helpful?*

You might also ask about:

- Ways to manage the causes of the bowel problem.
- Additional suggestions for bowel training.

Encourage your loved one to share concerns about her bowel problems with you or another trusted family member or friend. Keep in mind that having bowel problems is a personal, private matter for most people. You and your loved one might ask family and friends to:

- Offer your loved one fluid to drink.
- Take a walk with your loved one.
- Bring a meal that is appropriate for her bowel problem.
- Assist your loved one to use the toilet when appropriate.
- Help modify your home to make it easier for your loved one to use the toilet.

QUICK REFERENCE

Below is a recap of the general strategies that can help you as a caregiver manage your loved one's bowel problems. Check those that you would like to try with your loved one. You can use this page as a quick reference.

Constipation

- Drink plenty of fluids and eat the right amounts of fiber. (Page 8:8)
- Suggest a daily bowel elimination routine and create comfort. (Page 8:8)
- Be proactive about preventing constipation when starting treatment or new medicine. (Page 8:9)
- Use laxatives when needed. Talk to cancer care provider about when to use laxatives and what types. (Page 8:9)
- Try massage. (Page 8:10)

Diarrhea

- Eat a low-residue diet if starting a treatment that causes diarrhea. (Page 8:11)
- Supplement with psyllium and/or probiotics (check with cancer care provider first). (Page 8:10)
- Replace lost fluids if diarrhea develops. (Page 8:11)
- Manage diarrhea with a low-residue diet. (Page 8:11)
- Use anti-diarrhea medicine, under the guidance of HCP. (Page 8:12)
- Practice good skin care. (Page 8:12)

Bowel Control Problems

- Eat a bowel-healthy diet and get exercise. (Page 8:11)
- Practice Bowel Training techniques and create a comfortable, easy bathroom experience. (Page 8:12)
- Try pelvic floor (Kegel) exercises. (Page 8:13)
- Be supportive, help her feel prepared and more confident if she is incontinent. (Page 8:13)

Talking with Others

- Keep track of symptoms and bowel habits. (Page 8:14)
- Ask cancer care provider questions and address concerns. (Page 8:14)
- Ask trusted family members to help out when appropriate. (Page 8:14)

Resources & Links

- Kegel pelvic floor exercises: www.mayoclinic.org

YOUR GOALS & STRATEGIES

What strategies make the most sense to you? How can you and your family use those strategies in your own life?

Create a Plan:

Think about specific goals you want to accomplish. Just tackle one or two goals at a time.

My goal is to _____ (what do you hope will happen) **by** _____ (timeframe) **so that** _____ (why it's important).

What specific strategies will you use to reach your goal? Think about the very next steps you can take to get started.
