

## What causes constipation after surgery?

After your surgery you may experience constipation. Surgery patients are prone to constipation for multiple reasons:

- **Pain Medication:** The primary reason for constipation after surgery is that the prescription drugs given for pain relief can cause constipation. If you must take large or multiple doses of pain medication or you have taken the pain medication for an extended period of time, you may be at risk for constipation.
- **Food and Drink After Surgery:** As part of your preparation for surgery, you may have been instructed not to eat or drink. After surgery, you may have been told to drink minimally and perhaps not eat solid foods at all for a day or two. The combination of too little fluid and no food intake can work against your body's normal routine of elimination.

Too little fluid in the body means less fluid in feces, resulting in hard, dry stools. Food works to stimulate the digestive system and keep things moving along. With no food being eaten, the "food in, food out" mechanism doesn't work.

Your dietary choices, along with your intake level, may have changed after surgery. Even the food provided in the hospital may be a major change from your normal diet and can cause constipation.

**Inactivity:** Getting up and walking or being active is one of the triggers for a bowel movement. Suddenly spending most of your time bed resting can help to trigger a bout of constipation.

- **Anesthesia:** Most patients think of anesthesia as something that puts us to sleep. Anesthesia, though, also paralyzes the muscles: your intestine is paralyzed during surgery along with your arms and legs. This stops the muscle contractions to push food along the intestinal tract. Until your intestines "wake up" there is not movement of feces.

Surgery patients are far more likely to have a bout of constipation than the average person. If you are prone to constipation you should mention this to your surgeon, as you will be at greater risk for constipation. A stool softener may be prescribed. Prevention is key after surgery, because constipation can be very painful.

If your surgeon has prescribed a medication for constipation or recommended an over-the-counter treatment, such as a stool softener or an enema, it should work to relieve your symptoms. You may want to take a mild stool softener prescribed by your surgeon as a preventative measure, rather than waiting until symptoms develop. Do not use over-the-counter treatments without first discussing it with your doctor. Your surgeon needs to be aware of your symptoms and medications you are taking.

Increase your intake of fluids which can help keep you well-hydrated and decrease your risk of constipation. **If you become constipated, do not hesitate to take over-the-counter laxatives as directed on the packaging, unless directed otherwise by your surgeon.** Fluids will also help your body to recover if you develop constipation.

Focus your food intake on healthy, whole foods, such as fresh fruit and vegetables. This will decrease the risk for constipation and help improve symptoms if constipation does develop.

If you have any further questions, please contact our office at 817-267-2678.