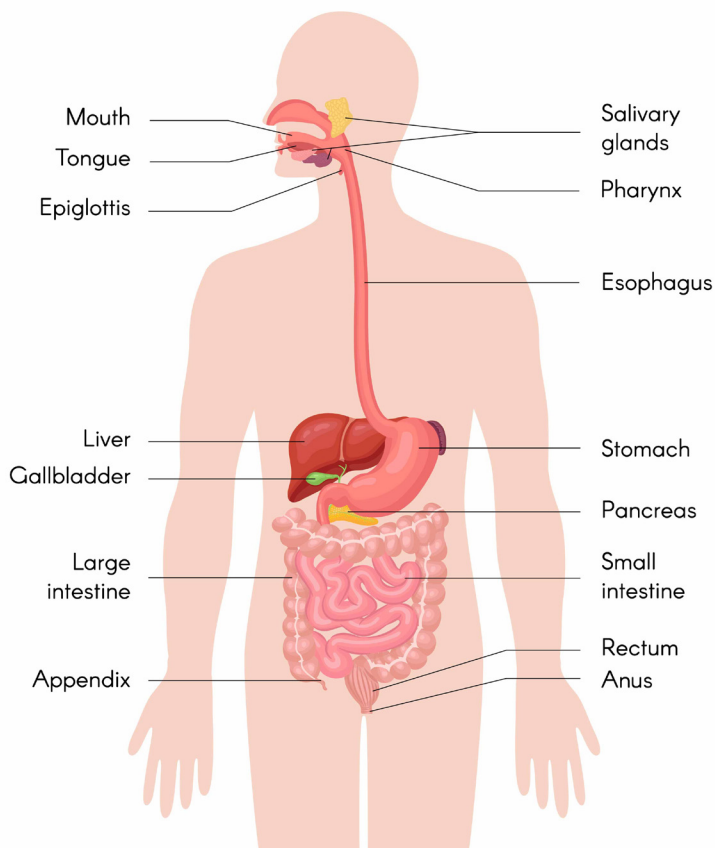


Up to 70% of people with serious illness suffer from constipation, and up to 90% of people taking opioid medication, such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, and morphine, experience constipation. Signs of constipation include having bowel movements less often and/or having hard, dry and difficult to pass stools. People suffering from constipation may also have abdominal pain, cramping, bloating, and nausea.



Causes of constipation

Opioid medications used for pain or shortness of breath are a major cause of constipation in people with serious illness. Opioids slow down the intestine's natural motion that pushes stool out of the body. Opioids also interfere with the body's natural ability to keep stool soft and lubricated (mushy). Other medications can also cause constipation – including nausea medications, blood pressure medications, diuretics (water pills), iron, Parkinson's medications, and chemotherapy. People who are older, less active, not taking enough fluid or fiber, experiencing depression or have dementia are at higher risk for problems with constipation.

How to prevent and treat constipation (“Mush and Push” theory)

- Drink enough liquid. Fluid requirements vary from person to person. Unless on a fluid restriction, aim for about 8 cups of fluid per day or enough to keep urine light yellow in color. (More fluid than this is not necessarily better or safe for elderly or those with chronic illness, especially if heart, lung, liver, or kidney problems.)
- If tolerated, eat foods high in fiber such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans.
- If tolerated, increase physical activity such as walking, which helps passage of stool.

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Constipation

- Many different bowel medications are available over the counter to prevent and treat constipation. Most people taking opioids need to take these bowel medications regularly and proactively to avoid becoming constipated. The medications below have the best scientific evidence, especially for opioid-related constipation:
 - **Senna** is a natural, gentle laxative that helps stimulate the intestines to push stool out of the body. Senna comes in tablets, chewable tablets, liquid and tea.
 - **Bisacodyl** is a laxative that helps stimulate the intestines to push stool out of the body. It comes in tablets, suppositories and enemas.
 - **Polyethylene glycol** (brand name Miralax[®]) is a powder that helps keep more water in the intestines and makes stool softer (mush) along with stimulating the bowels to move (push). It must be mixed with fluid, but use caution if on a fluid restriction or have swallowing difficulties.
 - **Magnesium Hydroxide/Milk of Magnesia** keeps more water in the intestines, which softens the stool (mush). The extra volume in the intestine causes it to expand, which stimulates the intestine to push stool out of the body. Talk to your doctor before using this medication if you have kidney problems.
 - **Docosate** (brand name Colace[®]) has been called a stool softener, but the medical evidence shows less benefit in most patients compared with the above medications.
- Other prescription medications are available to treat constipation and may be needed in certain circumstances, especially with underlying intestinal disease or opioids.
- Sometimes severe constipation can lead to intestinal obstruction, which is a serious medical problem. Call your doctor if you have tried the strategies above and still have gone 5 days without a bowel movement, or if you develop vomiting and are unable to keep food/fluids down.