



# Medicines to manage constipation

This brochure contains some information on the medicines you may have been prescribed to manage constipation either in hospital or on discharge.

## What is constipation?

Constipation is a change in your bowel habit that involves any of the following:

- The passage of hard stools
- Difficulty passing stools
- Passing stools less frequently than normal.

Numerous factors can cause constipation including medicines, medical conditions and reduced mobility.

## Constipation in pregnancy and breastfeeding

Constipation is very common in pregnancy and in the period after birth. Fibre supplements are recommended as the first treatment option. Docusate (without senna), lactulose and macrogol are all safe to use in pregnancy and breastfeeding.

## Fibre supplements

Fibre is found in a variety of foods such as legumes, fruit and vegetables, nuts, wholegrains and seeds. There are certain laxatives that contain fibre: psyllium (Metamucil®) sterculia (Normacol Plus® and Normafibe®) and isphagula husk (Fybogel®). These are suitable for the treatment of constipation in patients who are able to move around easily and drink lots of water. Constipation may worsen if there is inadequate fluid intake with fibre supplements. Fibre supplements are NOT recommended when taking opioid pain relievers.

## Medicines for constipation

If fibre supplements don't work, your doctor may prescribe one of the following laxatives. You can buy the following medicines without a prescription from your local pharmacy.

Medication	Other information
<b>Docusate</b> (Coloxyl® 50mg or 120mg)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• SAFE to use in pregnancy and breastfeeding</li></ul>
<b>Lactulose</b> (Actilax®, Dulose®)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Takes about 1-3 days to start working</li><li>• Mix your dose with water or fruit juice to improve taste</li><li>• SAFE to use in pregnancy and breastfeeding</li></ul>
<b>Macrogol</b> (Movicol®, Herron Clearlax®)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dissolve each sachet in 125ml of water</li><li>• May take up to 2 days to start working</li><li>• SAFE to use in pregnancy and breastfeeding</li></ul>
<b>Docusate/Senna</b> (Coloxyl & Senna® 50mg/8mg)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Take at night for relief the next morning (8-12 hours)</li><li>• Alternative laxatives are preferred in pregnancy and breastfeeding</li></ul>

## What are some other strategies used to treat constipation?

All people with constipation are likely to benefit from dietary and lifestyle changes.

This includes:

- Increased fibre and fluid intake
- Increased exercise (if possible)
- Going to the toilet as soon as you feel the urge to have a bowel motion

## Which medicines can cause constipation?

- Antacids
- Iron supplements
- Calcium supplements
- Opioid pain relievers (such as codeine, tramadol and oxycodone)

This is not a complete list. Many other medicines can cause constipation. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you would like more information.

## When should you see your doctor?

Certain signs may require you to see your doctor, such as:

- Blood or mucus (or both) in the stool, particularly black, tarry or red stools
- Persistent or severe abdominal pain and vomiting
- Constipation that persists after 1 week of laxative use
- Constipation alternating with diarrhoea or a sudden change in bowel habits lasting for 2 weeks or more
- Unintentional/unexplained weight loss
- Feeling of incomplete emptying of the bowel.



More information is available for these medications in the form of Consumer Medicines Information (CMI). CMIs are available from hospitals, pharmacies and medical practices and from the Therapeutic Goods Administration website ([www.tga.gov.au](http://www.tga.gov.au)).

**Women and Newborn Health Service**  
Obstetrics Medicine Information Service

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