

Constipation Near the End of Life

LAURA MAVITY, M.D.

Causes

Constipation is a frequent problem for patients nearing end of life. There are many factors common to these patients that lead to constipation. Patients near end of life often have decreased appetite and thirst, leading to less intake of food and water, which can cause constipation. As a result of increasing weakness, many patients will be less active, a common cause of constipation. Patients near end of life frequently have pain and other symptoms needing treatment with medications that can cause constipation as a side effect. The bowel's ability to squeeze and push stool along towards the rectum can be affected by diseases that damage the nerves supplying the bowel. Tumors growing in the abdomen can slow and even push on the bowel, which can also result in constipation.

- ✓ Decreased intake of food and/or water
- ✓ Decreased activity
- ✓ Medication side effect
- ✓ Nerve damage to bowels by disease
- ✓ Tumors in the abdomen

Symptoms

Constipation can be very uncomfortable, and should be treated as aggressively as other symptoms that cause discomfort near end of life. Constipation can lead to abdominal pain and cramping, nausea, loss of control of bowel movements, and even hiccups and confusion. If constipation is prolonged, it can lead to blockage of the bowels by hard stool, which can lead to more discomfort and even vomiting.

- ✓ Abdominal pain and cramping
- ✓ Nausea
- ✓ Loss of bowel control
- ✓ Hiccups
- ✓ Confusion

Treatments

Medications are often used to help control constipation near end of life. Stool softeners help make stool come out easier with less straining, and can be taken orally. Suppositories can stimulate the lower bowels to help bring on a bowel movement. Many laxatives are taken orally to encourage bowel movements. Laxatives are frequently used on a regular daily basis when patients are prescribed strong pain medications to help control the side effect of constipation. Some laxatives come in tablets, and others come in liquid preparations, which may be preferred if patients have difficulty swallowing pills. Enemas are liquids injected into the rectum and can help to bring liquid into the lower bowels, and therefore soften stools and bring on bowel movements. For enemas to work well, patients usually need to have good control of their rectal muscles so they can hold the liquid material inside the lower bowels for some time. Fiber supplements are not usually used in treating constipation at end of life. Fiber supplements depend on high water intake and normal bowel squeezing action to work well. Although often helpful for healthy people, extra fiber can actually be quite detrimental in patients near end of life and can lead to a bowel blockage.

- ✓ Stool softeners: Docusate
- ✓ Suppositories: Glycerine, bisacodyl
- ✓ Laxatives: Senna, Sorbitol, lactulose, polyethylene glycol, magnesium preparations
- ✓ Enemas: Fleet, mineral oil, water

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Summary

In summary, constipation is a frequent problem than can lead to uncomfortable symptoms or bowel blockage near the end of life. Luckily, many medications can help prevent constipation before it starts. Health care providers can recommend which medications are most helpful in each patient's case.

Address reprint requests to:

Laura Mavity, M.D.

Kaiser Permanente

Continuing Care Services

Hospice and Palliative Care

2701 NW Vaughn Street, Suite 140

Portland, OR 97210

E-mail: mavlk@yahoo.com