Treatment of Opioid-Induced Constipation

Constipation is one of the most common side effects of opioid pain medications. Signs of constipation can include:

- Less frequent bowel movements
- Hard stools
- Difficulty or straining to eliminate
- Nausea, bloating, abdominal cramping or pain

What can you do about constipation?

Constipation often brings hard, dry stools. This is why we recommend using both a stool softener (docusate sodium) and a laxative (senna). The stool softener moistens the fecal matter so it is softer. The laxative promotes movement within the intestinal tract (bowel).

There are many forms of docusate and senna available. You can buy both without a prescription. Choose the generic tablets; this will work just as well as the name brand and can save you money.

How should you take these medicines?

- Take them daily, at bedtime.
- If you find you need to increase the dose, you can space tablets throughout the day – morning, noon, dinnertime, and bedtime – in order to avoid abdominal cramping.
- The recommended starting dose of docusate sodium or Colace® is one 100 mg capsule every day at bedtime. This can be increased to six capsules (or 600 mg) a day at most, if needed. Taken by itself, docusate may take one to three days to work.
- The recommended starting dose of senna or Senokot® is two 8.6 mg tablets every day at bedtime. This can be increased to eight tablets (about 70 mg) a day at most, if needed. Taken by itself, senna may take 6-12 hours to work. Do not be alarmed if senna changes the color of your urine to yellow-brown or pinkish-red.

Can I get both medicines in one tablet?

Yes, there are combination products available. Senokot-S® tablets contain both docusate sodium 50 mg and senna 8.6 mg. The recommended dose of Senokot-S® is two tablets taken together every day at bedtime. Again, this can be increased to eight tablets per day at most, if needed. Remember that generic products are available. Ask your pharmacist to help you select the product that’s best for you.

What else can I do for constipation?

- Drink plenty of fluids – at least eight glasses of water a day. Try to avoid caffeine and alcohol as these can have a dehydrating effect.
- Eat foods high in fiber (increase amounts slowly to avoid stomach cramping). Examples are:
  - Whole-grain bread, cereals, barley, oats, brown rice and pasta
  - Fresh fruits and dried fruits, such as prunes, raisins and dates
  - Fresh vegetables, or dried beans and peas
- Include juices, especially prune juice and apple juice, to help loosen stools.
- Drink a hot beverage about a half hour before your usual time for a bowel movement. Hot liquids often help to start bowel activity.
- If raw fruits and vegetables are hard to chew, try grating them into a salad or gelatin, or blenderize them.
- Eat the skin on fruits, vegetables and potatoes, unless you have trouble chewing or swallowing.
- Try high-fiber snack foods, such as oatmeal cookies, fig cookies and date or raisin bars. (Granola, popcorn or nuts may be used if you have no chewing or swallowing problems.)
- Add 1 to 2 tablespoons of unprocessed wheat bran to cereal, casseroles or homemade bread.
- Exercise if you are able, even if it is only walking around the house. Any movement helps to stimulate the bowel movement.

If problems with constipation continue even with the above suggestions, be sure to contact your health care provider for stronger prescription medicine.