



## PREVENTING CONSTIPATION WHILE TAKING ORAL IRON SUPPLEMENTS

KAISER PERMANENTE | SANTA CLARA

### Iron helps reduce the need for unnecessary blood transfusions during surgery.

In preparation for your surgery, your physician has ordered a laboratory test that measures the number of red blood cells in your bloodstream. Red blood cells are important because they carry oxygen to all the tissues in the body, and oxygen is essential for proper body functioning. Patients who have a low red blood cell count after surgery may require a blood transfusion. We try to prevent unnecessary transfusions because there can be serious side effects which your physician can discuss with you. In the meantime, we recommend starting an oral iron supplement that can boost your blood count before your upcoming surgery.

**Constipation** is a common side effect of oral iron and is a condition of having difficulty passing stools (bowel movements). Normally, people pass stools 2 or 3 times a day. Some people may have fewer bowel movements, even as low as once every 3 days. What is normal for you may not be normal for others.

### How can you prevent constipation and care for yourself while taking oral iron?

- **Drink plenty of fluids**, enough so that your urine is light-yellow or clear like water. Try to drink at least 8 glasses of water a day. If you have kidney, heart, or liver disease and have to limit fluids, talk with your doctor before you increase the amount of fluids you drink.
- Include **high-fiber foods** in your diet each day. These include fruits (like pears and prunes), vegetables, beans, and whole grains.
- Get at least 30 minutes of **exercise** on most days of the week. Walking is a good choice. You also may want to do other activities, such as running, swimming, cycling, or playing tennis or team sports.
- Take a **fiber supplement**, such as Citrucel or Metamucil, every day. Read and follow all instructions on the label.
- **Take your time** having your bowel movement. Straining too much can harm rectal tissue. A daily routine may help.
- **Support your feet** with a small step stool when you sit on the toilet. This helps flex your hips and places your pelvis in a squatting position.



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## What are some over-the-counter constipation medications?

If the lifestyle changes listed above do not work, consider taking the following over-the-counter medications\*:

- **Docusate Sodium** (DSS, Colace) is a stool softener. For this medication to work well, you must drink plenty of fluids.
- **Senna** (Senokot) is a mild laxative that rarely causes diarrhea or cramps. Take Senna 2 hours before or after other medications. Senna may take around 6 to 12 hours to work. You may need several doses before you have results.
- Consider trying a combination of **Docusate and Senna** if individual therapy does not work. Brands such as Peri-Colace, Senokot-S, and Senna Plus combine the two into a single pill. Check the active ingredient list on the box to confirm the contents of the medication.
- Read and follow all instructions on product labels provided by the manufacturer.

## What if you still do not have a bowel movement?

If Docusate, Senna, or the combination of Docusate and Senna do not work, you may need stronger laxatives to help you have a bowel movement\*.

- Take only ONE of the laxatives listed below at a time. Do NOT take in combination, unless as directed by your physician.
  - **Bisacodyl** (Dulcolax) is a stronger laxative that causes a strong action to completely empty the bowel. Bisacodyl may take around 6 to 12 hours to work.
  - **Milk of Magnesia** is an oral liquid laxative. Shake the bottle well before taking it. All doses should be followed by drinking 8 ounces of water. Milk of Magnesia takes around 30 minutes to 6 hours to work. Do not take Milk of Magnesia if you have a kidney disease.
  - **Polyethylene Glycol 3350** (Miralax) is a powder that you mix in water, juice, soda, coffee, or tea until it is dissolved. Polyethylene Glycol 3350 may take up to 24 hours to work.

**\*Helpful Hint:** Shopping for over-the-counter medications can be confusing. Each of the products listed above may be sold by different manufacturers under different brand names. When looking for constipation relief, search for the **active ingredients** listed in **red** above, usually located on the back of the container.

## Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- Your constipation is getting worse.
- You do not get better as expected.
- You have new or worsening belly pain.
- You have new or worsening nausea or vomiting.
- You have blood in your stools.

*\*Read and follow all instructions on the label. Do not use laxatives on a long-term basis. If you do not obtain results after using the laxatives, contact your physician.*

See reverse side for additional information