

Bowel health after cancer treatment

Bowel changes after prostate cancer treatment



This leaflet is for people who are experiencing bowel changes following radiotherapy for prostate cancer. It provides simple steps that may help with changes such as loose poo, urgency, wind and leaks.

This leaflet provides general advice and does not replace the advice of your healthcare team.

You are not alone. Bowel changes can happen during treatment, soon after it, or years later. Help is available.

What changes can happen?

You may have one or more of these problems:

- Loose or watery poo.
- Needing to go to the toilet urgently.
- Going to the toilet more often than usual.
- Wind, cramps or a swollen tummy.
- Mucus or blood from your back passage.
- Feeling that you have not finished emptying your bowels.
- Leaking poo or staining on your pants.
- Constipation or hard poo.

Please tell your team. Do not feel shy. These problems can affect your sleep, work, travel and sex. Your prostate cancer digital follow up support worker or GP can help.

Why do bowel changes happen?

Radiotherapy may change your bowel habits. These changes can happen for different reasons. What you eat can play a part, but it is not the only cause.

Things to try

Start with small changes

Try one change at a time. Give it a few days to see if it helps before making another change.

1. Keep a 7-day bowel diary

For 1 week, write down:

- What and when you eat and drink.
- How often you open your bowels (have a poo).
- Whether the poo is hard, formed, loose or watery.
- Whether you had to rush to the toilet.
- Any symptoms such as pain, wind, leaks or blood from your back passage.
- Any medicines that you take.

This can help you to spot patterns and identify things that might be affecting your bowel symptoms. Take the diary to your next appointment.

2. Eat little and often

- Try 3 small meals and 2 or 3 snacks each day.
- A large meal may be harder for your bowel to manage.
- Eat slowly and chew food well.
- Do not miss meals.

3. Drink enough

Aim for 6 to 8 mugs or glasses of drink each day, unless your healthcare team has told you otherwise.

- Water, milk, squash and caffeine-free drinks all count.
- Cut down on caffeine gradually if it makes you rush to the toilet. It is found in coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks.
- Alcohol and fizzy drinks can make symptoms worse for some people.

Signs you may need more fluid: Dark urine, a dry mouth, headache, dizziness or passing less urine.

Food choices

What can help to make my poo firmer?

There is no single diet that works for everyone. It can take time to find what foods suit you best.

If your poo is loose or you need to rush to the toilet

For a short time, try less of the rough, hard-to-digest parts of food.

Try to eat these foods more often	Try to eat less of these foods for now
White bread, rice or pasta	Bran and high-bran cereal
Oats or porridge	Large amounts of wholegrain food
Potatoes without the skin	Fruit and vegetable skins, pips and stalks
Ripe banana or peeled, soft fruit	Large amounts of nuts, seeds and dried fruit
Well-cooked, peeled vegetables	Very spicy food (if it bothers you)

This is a short-term change. You can gradually add foods back in when things settle. Ask a dietitian for help if you need to limit or avoid many foods.

Try less fat if it causes loose poo

Low fat does not mean no fat. Try smaller amounts of:

- Fried food and takeaways.
- Pies, pastries and sausages.
- Butter, cream and rich sauces.

Choose grilled, baked or boiled foods instead. If you find this really helps, tell your team. You may need a test for a condition called bile acid diarrhoea.

Fibre supplements and anti-diarrhoea medicine

A fibre supplement, such as psyllium (ispaghula husk), may help some people. Anti-diarrhoea medicine such as Loperamide may also help. Speak to your nurse, doctor or pharmacist before taking these. Follow the dose they recommend.

Do not take Loperamide if you have blood in your poo, a fever, bad tummy pain, a swollen tummy or constipation.
Seek medical advice.

Constipation

If your poo is hard, hard to pass or you feel that your bowel has not fully emptied, try:

- Eating meals at about the same times each day.
- Drinking 6 to 8 mugs or glasses of fluid each day, unless your team has told you otherwise.
- Adding fibre slowly if your poo is hard. Try oats, soft fruit, cooked vegetables or potatoes.
- Taking a short walk after a meal, if you are able.
- Sitting on the toilet 15 to 30 minutes after breakfast. This is when the bowel often moves best. Do not strain. If nothing happens, get up after 5 to 10 minutes and try again later.

Use a good position when sitting on the toilet

This can help the muscles around your bottom relax.

- Sit fully on the toilet. Do not hover above the seat.
- Put your feet on a small, firm footstool.
- Keep your knees a little higher than your hips.
- Lean forward and rest your arms on your thighs.
- Let your tummy soften. Breathe out slowly.
Do not hold your breath.
- Do not strain. If nothing happens, get up after 5 to 10 minutes and try again later.

If you still feel full after a bowel movement

A feeling that your bowel has not fully cleared after a bowel movement is called incomplete emptying. It may be caused by hard poo, swelling, or muscles that do not relax at the right time.

Ask for help if this keeps happening. A continence nurse or pelvic health physiotherapist can check how the muscles are working. Do not use enemas or suppositories unless your healthcare team says they are safe for you.

If you often feel you need to go to the toilet urgently

Feeling a sudden urge to go to the toilet can be quite distressing. Try to eat slowly and in a relaxed way. This may help your digestion and reduce the amount of air you swallow when eating.

Try:

- Sitting down to eat and taking 3 slow breaths before the first bite.
- Taking small bites and chewing well.
- Putting your knife and fork down between some bites.
- Eating without a screen for the first 5 minutes.

Control and confidence

Pelvic floor, skin care and going out

Small steps can help you feel more confident and more in control.

Pelvic floor exercises

The pelvic floor muscles help you hold in wind and poo. To find these muscles, imagine you are trying to stop yourself passing wind. Gently squeeze and lift the muscles around your back passage.

While sitting or lying down, use these muscles and:

- Slowly squeeze them: Hold for up to 5 seconds. Relax for 5 seconds. Repeat up to 10 times.
- Quickly squeeze them: Squeeze and let go. Repeat up to 10 times.

Do both sets 3 times each day. Keep breathing. Try not to tighten your legs, tummy or buttocks.

Stop and ask for advice if an exercise causes pain or makes emptying harder. Some people have muscles that are too tight and need help to relax them. Ask for a pelvic health physiotherapy referral. Do not practice pelvic floor exercises by stopping your urine mid-flow, as this can affect your bladder.

Looking after sore skin

- Wash your skin gently after any leakage or bowel movement. Use warm water or a mild, unperfumed cleanser.
- Avoid scented soap, talc and wipes that contain alcohol.
- Pat dry. Do not rub.
- Use a thin layer of barrier cream or ointment if your nurse or pharmacist advises it.
- Wear cotton underwear. Change wet or dirty pads as soon as you can.

Tell your team if your skin is broken, bleeding, very painful or not getting better.

Get quicker access to a toilet

Macmillan toilet card and key ring: Order free at  orders.macmillan.org.uk or call ☎ **0808 808 00 00**.

Just Can't Wait card: A free digital card is available at  www.bladderandbowel.org. A plastic card can also be bought.

RADAR key: Opens many locked accessible toilets. You can buy one from Disability Rights UK at  www.disabilityrightsuk.org.

Please note: A toilet card explains that you need to use a toilet quickly. It does not guarantee that every place will let you use one.

Getting more help

When bowel problems do not settle

You do not have to put up with bowel problems.

Ask your team for a check up

Contact your support worker or GP if symptoms continue, get worse, wake you at night, or stop you doing normal things.

There can be causes that need a test or treatment, such as:

- Bile acid diarrhoea - Too much bile in the bowel can make it work too quickly and cause diarrhoea.
- Low levels of digestive enzymes - This means food may not be broken down and absorbed properly.
- Too many bacteria in the small bowel, which can cause symptoms such as wind, bloating and diarrhoea.
- A problem with the muscles that help control your bowel.
- A food intolerance or another bowel condition.

Get urgent help

Call your GP or NHS 24 on ☎ 111 now if you have:

- New bleeding from your back passage, or bleeding that is getting worse.
- Black, sticky poo.
- Bad tummy pain, a swollen tummy or repeated vomiting.
- A fever with diarrhoea.
- Signs of dehydration, such as feeling faint or passing very little urine.
- Weight loss, weakness, or trouble eating and drinking.

Call ☎ 999 for heavy bleeding, collapse, confusion or severe pain.

Important: Bleeding must be checked. Do not assume it is only caused by radiotherapy.

More information and support

The Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre website has a selection cancer recovery self-help videos and information.

Please access the website or scan the QR code below to see a collection of short videos developed by clinicians at The Beatson Cancer Centre. They are designed to help people manage the longer-term effects of cancer treatment. Each video explains why symptoms happen, offers practical self-help advice, and highlights when to seek medical advice.

🌐 https://www.beatson.scot.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-support-services/information-videos_draft/

Please scan QR code:



Pelvic Radiation Disease Association (PRDA)

Information for people living with bowel and other late effects after pelvic radiotherapy:  <https://www.prda.org.uk/>

NHS 24: Call  111 when your GP is closed.

Your local contact: Contact your health board specific Support Worker:

NHS Ayrshire and Arran:  **01292 616981**

NHS Forth Valley:  **01324 566451**

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde:  **0141 211 8410**

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde:  **07977 810473**

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde:  **0141 956 0752**

NHS Lanarkshire:  **01698 753550**

WCRF Nutrition Helpline (cancer dietitian helpline)

 **0300 102 2523**

 <https://www.wcrf.org/living-well/living-with-cancer/cancer-and-nutrition-helpline/>

Prostate Cancer Scotland

 **0131-603 8660**

 <https://www.prostatescotland.org.uk/>

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