



**Pearls from the Palliative Medicine Team, #3, Nov 2003**  
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**TREATMENT OF CONSTIPATION IN THE PALLIATIVE PATIENT**  
**Remember “Why does this patient have this problem now?”**

<b>PSYLLIUM (Metamucil®), DOCUSATE SODIUM (Colace®)</b>	Most palliative patients aren't able to drink adequate amounts of water to make psyllium or colace an effective laxative. The use of colace remains controversial.	Psyllium, Metamucil and other bulk forming agents are not recommended. Colace is classed as a surface-wetting agent.
<b>SENNOSIDES (Senokot®)</b>	Sennosides are a mild laxative and may not be effective.	Use when only a mild laxative is required.
<b>BISACODYL (Dulcolax®)</b>	A more effective laxative than sennosides.	Use if sennosides are ineffective. (Discontinue the Senokot®.)
<b>LACTULOSE (Acilac®)</b>	An effective laxative that can easily be added to juice, yoghurt, cereal, ice cream, etc., if not tolerated on its own.	The use of lactulose is recommended.
<b>HOMEMADE REMEDIES (Prunes)</b>	Patients often enjoy these effective mixtures rather than taking another medication.	Suggested recipe follows. Yakima Fruit Paste Recipe

<u><b>Bulk-forming (fibre)</b></u> methylcellulose, psyllium  <u><b>Lubricants</b></u> mineral oil  <u><b>surface-wetting agents</b></u> docusate sodium (Colace®)	<u><b>osmotic laxatives</b></u> lactulose syrup magnesium hydroxide suspension (Milk of Magnesia®) magnesium sulphate (epsom salts)  <u><b>contact (stimulant) laxatives</b></u> bisacodyl (Dulcolax®) sennosides (Senokot®) sodium picosulphate (Fleet Phospho-Soda Oral Laxative®)
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<b>WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) 5-STEP PROGRAM*</b>	
<b>Step 1</b>	Stimulant laxative, eg. bisacodyl 5mg 1-2 OD
<b>Step 2</b>	Increase up to 20mg (4 tabs) bid
<b>Step 3</b>	Add osmotic laxative (lactulose 15-30ml OD to bid)
<b>Step 4</b>	Replace lactulose with an emulsion (equal parts) of magnesium hydroxide (Milk of Magnesia®) and mineral oil 10-30ml OD-bid
<b>Step 5</b>	If above fails, use bisacodyl suppositories (10-20mg) followed by sodium phosphate (Fleet®) enema 2 hrs later
<hr/> * WHO Symptom Relief in Terminal Illness. WHO 1998, from "Palliative Pocket Consultant", 1999.	

- **Diarrhea can be a sign of fecal impaction and constipation. Remember to always rule out impaction.**
- **Rectal exams and abdominal flat plate X-rays can be helpful in the assessment of constipation.**

**References:**

[www.palliativedrugs.com](http://www.palliativedrugs.com) search "constipation"

World Health Organization "Symptom Relief in Palliative Care" ISBN 92 4 154507 0

Palliative Care Pocket Consultant "A reference guide symptom management in palliative care", second edition ISBN 0-7872-8701-6