

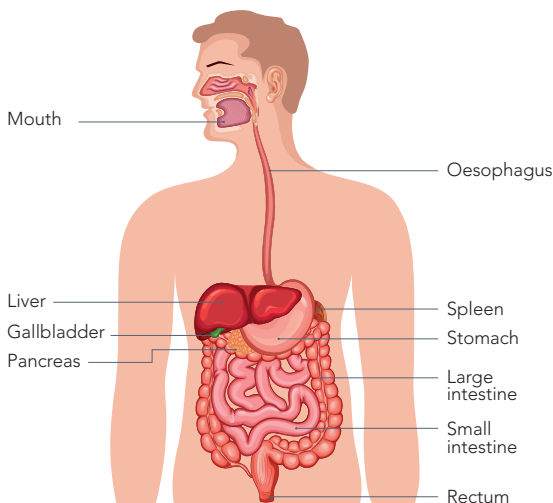
Gastrointestinal issues

Health information after cancer treatment as a child or teenager

The purpose of this factsheet is to tell you about long-term side effects (called 'late effects') that can happen after having cancer treatment. They can happen soon after treatment has finished or later in life. The medical team at the hospital where you received your treatment or are attending follow-up checks will be able to help you with specific information about which late effects are relevant to you.

What is the gastrointestinal system?

The gastrointestinal (GI) system takes in food, digests it in the stomach and intestines to extract and absorb nutrients, and then gets rid of the remaining waste as poo. The GI system is shown below.



Who is at risk?

Gastrointestinal issues can happen if you have had:

- abdominal surgery, especially when combined with abdominal radiotherapy
- oesophageal surgery or tumour involving the region of the oesophagus
- abdominal radiotherapy, including total body irradiation (TBI)
- Graft versus host disease (GVHD) anywhere in your GI system

What are the symptoms of gastrointestinal issues?

Constipation

Damage to the nerves in your bowel may lead to long-term constipation. Occasionally, drugs such as vincristine may cause lasting constipation. This is a common symptom many people have and it can be managed by following this advice:

- drink plenty of fluid to help hydrate your bowels so that poo is softer
- eat a diet with plenty of fibre such as wholegrain cereals and bread, fruit and vegetables

Some patients may require medication which can be discussed with their GP or follow-up team.

Diarrhoea

Occasionally, diarrhoea can be very problematic after treatment for some abdominal tumours, especially for neuroblastoma or after gut graft versus host disease (GVHD). Drugs such as loperamide (called imodium), may need to be used on a long-term basis to manage this.

Abdominal and particularly pelvic radiotherapy including total body irradiation (TBI) can lead to symptoms of diarrhoea, bloating, or abdominal discomfort. In extreme cases, diarrhoea can be severe including a feeling of needing to have a poo even when you have just been, and pain. You may need to be referred to a specialist doctor called a gastroenterologist to rule out any other causes of diarrhoea.

Toilet cards or radar NKS keys from Disability Rights UK may help people with diarrhoea and continence problems after cancer treatment.

Bowel adhesions

These are areas of scar tissue from abdominal surgery and radiotherapy which cause organs and tissues in the abdomen to stick together. These may cause a partial or complete obstruction or blockage in the intestines.

Symptoms of bowel obstruction include:

- abdominal pain
- bloating
- constipation
- being sick and unable to poo properly (usually a later sign) Patients at risk need an urgent referral to a surgeon for assessment and management. Sometimes, adhesions require an operation but often the blockage gets better with a period of rest for your stomach with pain relief and intravenous fluid for support.

Narrowing of your oesophagus

Damage to your oesophagus (swallowing tube) may happen as a result of surgery or radiotherapy. This can lead to narrowing making it difficult to swallow and for food to pass through easily. If this happens, you may need oesophageal dilation (where your oesophagus will be stretched and widened) or surgery.

Poor absorption of food (malabsorption)

Some gastrointestinal surgery (usually when parts of your small intestine are removed during surgery) or radiotherapy can lead to poor absorption.

Symptoms include:

- diarrhoea
- food passing through undigested
- losing weight

Vitamin and nutrient supplements may be needed, with dietitian support. Vitamin B12 replacement may be needed in patients who required the removal of part of their small intestine.

Chronic severe graft versus host disease (GVHD) can also lead to diarrhoea and malabsorption.

Bowel cancer

Patients who have had abdominal radiotherapy have a greater risk of developing bowel cancer. You can discuss this risk with your doctor and whether referral for bowel cancer screening would be appropriate.

If you have any change in your bowel habit or blood in your poo, see your GP urgently and explain your concerns about having a second cancer. Other signs of bowel cancer include:

- a change in the shape of your poo (such as becoming very thin)
- severe cramping pain in your lower abdomen
- a feeling of discomfort or an urge to have a poo when you don't need to go
- a change in how frequently you have a poo

What can I do?

There is plenty you can do to maintain good gastrointestinal health:

- **eat more fibre** to help digestion and prevent constipation: 30g of fibre per day is the recommended amount. You can find fibre in wholemeal bread, brown rice, fruit and vegetables, beans, and oats.
- **drink plenty of water** to help digestion
- **cut down on fatty foods** such as red meat, cheese, milk
- **avoid food and drinks** that trigger digestive symptoms for you
- **consider probiotics** 'friendly bacteria' which can be found in some yoghurts or supplements

Where can I find more information?

www.nhs.uk/conditions/bowel-cancer

Bowel Cancer UK

www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk

Disability Rights UK

www.disabilityrightsuk.org



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Written by CCLG Late Effects Group, a national network of experts who specialise in looking after young cancer survivors, in conjunction with the CCLG Information Advisory Group, comprising multiprofessional experts in the field of children's cancer. If you have any comments on this factsheet, please contact us. CCLG publications on a variety of topics related to children's cancer are available to order or download free of charge from our website.

Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group (CCLG) is a leading national charity and expert voice for all childhood cancers.

Each week in the UK and Ireland, more than 30 children are diagnosed with cancer. Our network of dedicated professional members work together in treatment, care and research to help shape a future where all children with cancer survive and live happy, healthy and independent lives.

We fund and support innovative world-class research and collaborate, both nationally and internationally, to drive forward improvements in childhood cancer. Our award-winning information resources help lessen the anxiety, stress and loneliness commonly felt by families, giving support throughout the cancer journey.

Our work is funded by donations. If you would like to help, text 'CCLG' to 70300 to donate £3. You may be charged for one text message at your network's standard or charity rate. CCLG (registered charity numbers 1182637 and SC049948) will receive 100% of your donation.