FAST FACTS: Bowel Management for Opioid Use

Constipation is an anticipated side effect of opioid use and when left untreated may cause further pain and complications, such as stool impaction, anal fissures, or hemorrhoids. Inadequate bowel elimination is of particular concern in the older adult as many natural body changes, as well as chronic disease already impact the ability of patients to appropriately evacuate their bowels. Opioid use further complicates bowel management in the older adult by slowing gastric motility. This known side effect requires preventative attention at the start of opioid therapy. The following FAST FACT provides assessment and management of constipation related to opioid use.

- Bowel History is necessary prior to assigning treatment
  - Usual frequency of bowel movements
  - Size, color & consistency of bowel movement
    - A normal bowel movement should be easy to pass, dark brown, mostly even shaped & toothpaste-like in consistency.

- Review medication. In addition to opioids, tricyclic antidepressants, antacids, diuretics, iron, anti-hypertensive’s, anticonvulsants, anticholinergics, and NSAIDS can all cause constipation.

- Stool softeners (e.g. Colace) may be added if stool hardness is an issue. Softeners increase lubrication in the bowel to help feces pass easily (e.g. Docusate).

- Prophylactic laxatives should be started with the start of opioid medications and titrated to response as opioids are titrated up. Laxatives will increase bowel motility.

- Laxatives work differently in the bowel and should be selected based on the individual bowel issues.
  - Stimulants (e.g. Senna)
    - Triggers GI motility by irritating the intestine, usually taken at night
  - Bulk Forming (e.g. Psyllium Fiber)
    - Absorbs water and increases bulk which distends the bowel and triggers bowel reflex.
  - Hyperosmotics (e.g. Polyethylene Glycol)
    - Adds water to the intestine to again distend the bowel and trigger bowel reflex.

References
Leavitt, MA. Consequences of Opioid – Induced Constipation. [http://Pain-Topics.org](http://Pain-Topics.org)