

A Teen Guide to Stimulant Laxatives



Medicines that help the bowel muscles and are used to treat constipation

What are stimulants?

Stimulants are a group of laxative medications that are used to treat constipation and faecal impaction.

Constipation is a common condition in teenagers. Constipation happens when the rectum, the bit of bowel nearest the bottom, is not fully emptied when poo is passed. Impaction happens when the constipation becomes severe.

You may be constipated if:

- You are opening your bowels (pooing) less than three times a week, or more than three times a day
- Your poos are large, small or different sizes
- Your poo is hard or is different consistencies. For example, it may vary between being hard, runny, or sticky
- You are soiling (any amount of poo leaking into your underwear).

There is more information about constipation and its symptoms in teenagers in the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet [Understanding constipation and faecal impaction.](#)

The stimulant laxatives that are usually used in teenagers are sodium picosulfate or senna. Docusate sodium is also sometimes used. This has a softening as well as a stimulant effect.

A Teen Guide to Stimulant Laxatives

How do stimulants work?

The active ingredient in stimulant laxatives help the muscles in the bowel wall work more effectively, so the poo moves through the bowel more quickly. This helps the poos stay soft and makes them easier to pass.

Stimulant laxatives usually begin working **8 – 12 hours** after you take them. They may work more quickly than this, or they may take much longer. How quickly they start to work will depend on how constipated you are and how your body responds to the stimulant laxative.

Why has my doctor or nurse suggested I try a stimulant laxative?

Macrogol laxatives are usually the first laxatives used to treat constipation in teenagers. These include Cosmocol, Laxido and Movicol. More information about them can be found in the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet **Understanding Macrogol laxatives**.

Macrogols used on their own do not always make constipation completely better. Some teenagers find them difficult to take or find that they do not work well enough for them. Stimulant laxatives work in a different way to the macrogols, so can be used at the same time as a macrogol, or instead of the macrogol.

Can I buy stimulants?

Stimulants, as with all other laxatives, should only be taken by teenagers if they are suggested for you by a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. You should ask your GP, nurse or a pharmacist for advice. If constipation has been a problem for more than a few days or you are feeling unwell, you should speak to your GP or nurse.

How are stimulants taken?

Most stimulant laxative medications are available as a liquid. Some are also available as a tablet. You should follow the advice of your doctor or nurse about how much to take and how often to have it. Most only need to be taken once a day.

A Teen Guide to Stimulant Laxatives

What is the correct time of day to have the stimulant?

It does not matter what time of day you take the stimulant. However, your doctor or nurse may suggest a time that would be best for you. It is often helpful to take the stimulant at the same time(s) each day. This will help you to remember to have it. Also, it might help you to poo at the same time every day. This will allow you to have a regular toilet time every day, which might reduce the likelihood of soiling.

What if I do not like the taste?

Most teenagers get used to the taste of the stimulant medication quickly. If you are struggling with the taste, you could try having a drink of water, or diluted sugar-free squash just after you have had it. You could try adding the stimulant to a flavour of squash that you have not had before. You could also try diluting the stimulant with water or adding a flavouring such as a sugar-free squash. If you do dilute it, then you must drink the full drink to make sure you have all of it.

If you are still struggling to take the stimulant talk to your doctor or nurse. They may be able to prescribe a different stimulant or give you a different type of laxative.

What do I do if the stimulant is not working well?








If you feel you are still constipated when you have been taking the stimulant medication as you were told to, speak to your doctor or nurse. They may be able to change the dose. Or they might suggest you have another medicine as well as or instead of the stimulant.

How much stimulant should I have?

Your doctor or nurse will tell you how much to take. This dose may need to be changed, depending on how your bowels respond. The aim is for you to have the dose of stimulant (and any other laxatives they have been prescribed) that helps you to pass a good amount of soft poos (type 4-5 on the chart overleaf) once to three times most days.

A Teen Guide to Stimulant Laxatives

The Bristol Stool Form Scale

Type 1		Seperate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass)
Type 2		Sausage-shaped but lumpy
Type 3		Like a sausage but with cracks on its surface
Type 4		Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
Type 5		Soft blobs with clear cut edges (passed easily)
Type 6		Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool
Type 7		Watery, no solid pieces ENTIRELY LIQUID

The dose that achieves this is often called the maintenance dose. Usual maintenance doses of stimulants are shown in the chart below. Do not take more stimulant than your doctor or nurse has told you to have.

Age	Usual recommended dose of sodium picosulfate 5mg/5ml
4 – 18 years old	2.5ml – 20ml once a day

Age	Usual recommended dose of senna 7.5mg / 5ml
4 – 18 years old	2.5ml – 20ml once a day

A Teen Guide to Stimulant Laxatives

It may take at least a few days for you to start to pass soft poos when you start taking a stimulant medication. This is normal.

If your poos stay or become small or are hard (type 1 – 3), or you are not managing to open your bowels most days, then you may need to have more laxative. You should ask your doctor or nurse about increasing the dose. Try to avoid changing the dose more than once every three to four days. It takes time for your bowel to adjust to a new dose of stimulant laxative.

If your poos stay hard (type 1 – 3), and you are only taking a stimulant laxative you may need a laxative that works by softening the poos. This can be given as well as or instead of the stimulant. Macrogol laxatives, lactulose and docusate sodium all work by softening poo.

Do stimulants cause any side-effects?

Although medicines can be very helpful, sometimes they can cause things you may not want to happen. These are called side effects.

Some teenagers experience new or worsening soiling when they first start to take stimulant laxatives. They may also develop loose poo. This does not usually mean that the laxative is too strong, or that the dose is too high. It is likely to be a sign that the stimulant laxative is working, and the constipation is starting to clear. If the soiling and/or loose stools continue after a few days, speak to your doctor or nurse. The dose may need to be adjusted for you.

Other side-effects include tummy aches, but these usually settle after a few days. It is important to remember that constipation can also cause tummy aches. Your doctor or nurse may suggest that you start with a small dose of stimulant laxative. This may reduce the likelihood of tummy aches. The dose can gradually be increased, as your doctor or nurse advises, until it is working well for you.

Rarely stimulants can make teenagers feel sick or cause you to be sick. However, severe constipation can also cause this.

If you are concerned that you have any side-effects from a stimulant laxative speak to your doctor or nurse, or a pharmacist.

A Teen Guide to Stimulant Laxatives

Do stimulant laxatives make the bowel lazy?

If constipation has been a problem for more than a short time, the muscles in the bowel wall can become over-stretched. The over-stretched muscles do not work as well as they should at moving poo through the bowel. The stimulants help the muscles to work better. If the laxatives are stopped before the bowel has had a chance to fully recover the constipation will return.

There is no evidence that stimulant laxatives make the bowel lazy. However, not taking laxatives for long enough causes constipation to come back. Therefore, you should continue to take the laxatives, as recommended by your doctor or nurse, for long enough that your bowel has time to fully recover. How long this takes will vary from teenager to teenager. Laxatives should be gradually reduced over weeks or months, rather than stopped suddenly.

If you have been constipated for more than a month or two when you start taking laxatives, you may need to take them for many weeks or months. It is safe for you to do this if they are prescribed or recommended by your doctor or nurse.

How long do I need to take the stimulant laxative for?

Every teenager is different. Therefore, it is not possible to say how long you will need to take the stimulant for. Most teenagers need to take a maintenance dose for many weeks or even months if they have had chronic constipation or faecal impaction. Some teenagers need to take laxatives for a year or two and some teenagers need them for longer than this.

Ask your doctor or nurse how long you need to take them for. You should be able to try a gradual reduction of your laxatives when you have had 3 – 6 months passing soft stools once to three times most days with no problems. You may be able to try to reduce sooner than this, if you start to pass large amounts of loose stools most days.

A Teen Guide to Stimulant Laxatives

Your doctor or nurse should advise you about how and when to reduce the stimulant laxatives. However, it is usually suggested that you try to reduce the dose by 1 – 2.5mls about every six weeks. If you develop any symptoms of constipation, it is usually suggested that you should have some extra laxative. If you need extra laxative more than once a week, you may need the dose increasing back to the dose at which you were last doing well. However, you should always follow your doctor or nurse's advice.

Further advice

Always read the leaflet that comes with any medicine that has been prescribed or recommended for you.
If you are worried or have questions speak to your doctor or nurse.
Always follow their advice.

There is more information about constipation and faecal impaction in the [Teenager information library](#).

Further information

Find more information about bladder and bowel health in our information library at www.bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline \(0161 214 4591\)](#).

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.