

EMERGENCY MEDICINE REPORTS

Side Effects of Opioids

General Approach to Managing Opioid-induced Constipation

All opioids cause constipation to varying degrees. Morphine is more constipating than methadone or fentanyl. Below are steps to follow in determining treatment:

- Ask about the patient's current and premorbid bowel habits, including laxative use.
- Encourage fluids, specifically fruit juice, and fruit.
- When prescribing an opioid, prescribe 50 mg docusate sodium and 8.6 mg senna, 2 tablets twice a day. Note: Consider a patient's existing laxative regimen, rather than changing automatically to docusate sodium/senna.
- Adjust the dose every 2-3 days as needed, up to 4 tablets three times a day, for a total daily dose of 600 mg docusate sodium and 103 mg senna.
- During dose titration and subsequently: If more than 3 days have passed since last bowel action, give suppositories, e.g., 10 mg bisacodyl and 4 g glycerin, or a micro-enema. Based on case reports of severe metabolic disturbances,³⁶ avoid the use of phosphate enemas, especially in elderly patients or those with any degree of renal impairment.
- If the maximum dose of docusate sodium/senna is ineffective, halve the dose and add 20 mL lactulose twice daily or 1 sachet polyethylene glycol each morning and titrate as necessary.
- Alternately, switch to an osmotic laxative, e.g., 20-40 mL lactulose 2-3 times per day or 1-3 sachets polyethylene glycol each morning.
- Lactulose or polyethylene glycol may be preferable in patients with a history of colic with colonic stimulants (senna, bisacodyl).

Adapted from: Twycross R, Wilcock W. *Hospice and Palliative Care Formulary USA*. 2nd ed. Nottingham, UK: palliativedrugs.com Ltd. 2008; 24.

Dosing for Methylnaltrexone

Dosing per manufacturer suggestions is weight-based:

- 38-62 kg = 8 mg every other day.
- 62-114 kg = 12 mg every other day.
- Outside of these ranges, 0.15 mg/kg is recommended.
- Halve the dose in severe renal insufficiency ($\text{CrCl} < 30$). Titrate to efficacy, but no more than once daily.