Bowel Impaction

Care Provider Bulletin

Did you Know?

• A person is considered constipated if they have fewer than 3 bowel movements per week
• Early identification and treatment is important
• Bowel obstruction can lead to aspiration, perforation, and peritonitis
• Bowel or fecal impaction can be life threatening

Common Symptoms of Bowel Impaction

• Intense need to have a bowel movement
• Inability to have a bowel movement
• Frequent small, hard stools
• Abdominal distention (hard, swollen-appearing stomach)
• Rectal pain
• Stomach cramps
• Nausea
• Watery diarrhea around the impaction
• Fecal incontinence
• Headache
• Unexplained weight loss
• Sudden change in usual bowel habits
• Malaise or general sense of unwellness

Severe Symptoms of Bowel Impaction

• Increased agitation, confusion for some
• Dehydration
• Rapid heart rate
• Fever

What is a Bowel Impaction?

Bowel or fecal impaction is a mass of dry, hard stool that can’t be eliminated by a normal bowel movement. It often follows extended periods of constipation.

Who is at Increased Risk?

• Elderly
• Individuals with Alzheimer disease, Parkinson disease, dementia
• Stroke victims
• Individuals with restricted mobility
• Individuals with spinal cord injuries

Developmental Disabilities Administration
What are Common Causes of Bowel Impaction?

- Constipation
- Not enough fiber intake
- Not enough fluid intake
- Medication side effects
- Excessive use of laxatives and diuretics
- Not being physically active for a long period of time
- Hemorrhoids
- Heart disease
- Kidney disease
- Digestive system problem
- Cancer

What Can Be Done to Avoid Bowel Impaction?

**Unless otherwise directed by a healthcare professional:**

- Drink plenty of water (6-8 glasses per day)
- Eat high fiber foods (3-4 servings of whole grain bread or cereal per day, plus fruits and vegetables)
- Avoid or reduce foods that are high in sugar
- Use of psyllium (i.e., Metamucil or Citrucel)
- Don’t use laxatives regularly without a prescription
- Avoid long periods of time in bed, if at all possible
- Exercise regularly
- Ask a doctor about the dangers of pain relievers, diuretics, and antidepressants
- Keep a bowel chart if the problem is ongoing; ask a doctor how to do this

Bowel Impaction Treatment

- Examination by a medical professional is necessary to confirm the diagnosis and determine the best treatment
- Use of enemas or manual removal by a qualified healthcare professional
- Medications such as laxatives can be used to prevent reoccurrences
- Surgery is needed in rare cases

**Enemas may cause irritation and bleeding and should not be used unless under a doctor’s care**

More information:

Harvard Health Publications
http://www.health.harvard.edu/digestive-health/constipation-and-impaction

Developmental Disabilities Resources for Healthcare Providers
http://cme.ucsd.edu/ddhealth/courses/chronic%20constipation.html