

Bowel Impaction

Care Provider Bulletin

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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

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



Severe Symptoms of Bowel Impaction

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

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

Seek prompt medical attention for someone experiencing symptoms of bowel or fecal impaction

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>