

Fact Sheet



Division of Developmental Disabilities Health Care Services

Constipation

Health Information Fact Sheet #4

Constipation is difficulty having a bowel movement or “going to the bathroom.” Fecal material may be hard, dry, and pass in small round pieces. Normal consistency of fecal material should be soft and pass easily from the bowel.

Fact Sheet guidelines have been provided as general information, not as a substitution for medical treatment from a physician.



Some Facts about Constipation:

- Frequency of bowel movements can vary from person to person.
- The average diet does not contain enough fiber or fluids, which aid in elimination of body waste.
- Medications may cause constipation difficulties when “going to the bathroom.”

Risk Factors (Causes):

Recognition of the following conditions will help alert you to potential risks:

- Neuromuscular or Degenerative Disorders, Spinal Cord Injuries, Birth Defects, or other disorders (such as Cerebral Palsy, Parkinson's, stroke, diabetes, and scoliosis)
- History of constipation, bowel obstruction or impaction
- Immobility, muscle weakness or poor body alignment making adequate bowel elimination difficult
- Difficulty swallowing or aspiration risk which make it difficult to eat or drink adequate amounts of fiber and fluid
- Decreased privacy using bathroom, time to use bathroom, or access to the bathroom circulation

What to Watch For:

Various conditions which can signal the potential for constipation include:

- Straining or grunting while attempting to have a bowel movement
- Frequent trips to the toilet or spending a lot of time on the toilet
- Complaints of bloating and stomach discomfort or pain
- Passing fecal material that appears hard or in smaller pieces
- Refusing to eat or drink

What to Do:

- *Obtain dietitian consult* for guidelines in correct amount of food and fluid requirements to aid in elimination of body waste.
- *Follow diet* prescribed by dietician or doctor.
- *Make sure diet guidelines are specific* (type of food, texture, how much fiber and how much fluid the person requires each day).
- *Ask doctor for specific guidelines/recommendations on:*
 - A toileting schedule?
 - How frequently to expect bowel movements?
 - When to report absence of bowel movements?
 - When to report other constipation symptoms?
- *If no guidelines provided, notify the doctor when:*
 - There have been no bowl movements for three (3) days.
 - Complaints of stomach or abdominal pain/discomfort.
 - Abdomen looks bloated (larger than normal) or feels firm/hard when touched.

Constipation

Hot Topics



Constipation can Cause Death:

Many vulnerable individuals die from the complications of constipation.

What to Watch For:

- Straining or grunting while attempting to have a bowel movement
- Frequent attempts or spending long periods of time attempting to have a bowel movement
- Bloating and/or stomach pain or discomfort
- Increased agitation or an increase in other behaviors
- Passing hard or small pieces of fecal material
- Refusing to eat or drink (later symptom):

Action Items:

- *Notify the doctor when individual has no bowel movement in three (3) days or has three (3) bowel movements or less per week*
- *Obtain doctor's bowel care orders, which may include:*
 - Medications to prevent constipation and promote regular bowel movements
 - Diet and Fluid recommendations
 - Medication Changes (when an individual's medicines may be causing constipation)

Emergency

- *Call 9-1-1 immediately (and begin CPR if necessary) when you observe or see any of the following signs:*
 - Vomiting material that smells like fecal material
 - Vomiting digested food that smells like feces

Immediate Urgent Care Visit if an individual has discomfort or pain; refusing food or fluids.

Call 9-1-1 immediately if vomit resembles digested foods and/or smells like feces.

Prevention:

- *Get plenty of fluids*
 - Provide lots of water and other clear liquids
 - Offer fluids frequently to individuals who are unable to make their needs known
 - Individuals with mobility restrictions
 - Individuals who are non-verbal
 - Anyone who cannot obtain fluids without assistance
 - Individuals with fluid restrictions/limits need their intake amounts adjusted for hot weather
 - Contact the individual's medical provider for adjustments
- *Contact the doctor when medicines may be causing constipation*
 - Many prescription and non-prescription medicines can cause constipation.
 - The following medications may cause or contribute to constipation:
 - Antidepressants
 - Antipsychotics
 - Narcotic Pain Medication
 - Antacids
 - Calcium and Iron Supplements
 - Certain Blood Pressure Medication
 - Cold Medicines (antihistamines)
- *Eat a diet rich in fiber*
 - Fiber helps move waste through the intestines quickly
 - Provide a variety of fruits and vegetables for snacks and with meals
 - Serve whole grains in place of processed items (whole grain breads, cereals, crackers)
- *Move bowels promptly*
 - Delaying or ignoring the urge to move your bowels causes constipation
 - Respond quickly to individuals asking to use toilet facilities
 - Establish toileting routines and schedules for individuals who cannot communicate their needs.
 - Keep track of bowel movements
 - Notify the doctor if there has been no bowel movement for three (3) days