



Health & Safety Alert #23-09-09

Constipation and Bowel Obstruction

The purpose of this alert is to provide guidelines on preventing or reducing the likelihood of constipation and bowel obstructions. Constipation is more than a quality of life issue. Complications from constipation can cause marked disability, even death. Complete blockage of bowel function (Bowel Obstruction) is always fatal unless recognized and treated in time. It requires hospitalization with medical or surgical intervention. Family members and staff who are familiar with an individual are the best persons to alert medical caregivers to signs of illness as individuals with mental retardation may not recognize or be able to communicate their symptoms.

What is constipation?

- A state in which an individual experiences a decrease in frequency and/or passage of hard, dry stools; difficult defecation; sluggish action of the bowels

Causes of constipation:

- Poor or irregular bowel habits.
- Not drinking enough fluid.
- Eating a poor diet low in fiber and high in animal fats or sugars.
- Physical inactivity (travel, prolonged bed rest due to illness, injury, or functional limitations).
- Surgery on the intestine or rectum.
- Many prescription and non-prescription medications.
- Medical conditions such as stroke, cancer, hemorrhoids.
- Increase in emotional or physical stress.

Drug classes associated with constipation:

- Pain medication containing codeine or other narcotic
- Minerals – iron, calcium, antacids, barium
- Medications which affect the nervous system such as anticonvulsants, antidepressants, antipsychotics

Complications of constipation include:

- Behavioral difficulties or change in behavior.
- Bowel problems from straining and passing hard stool (hemorrhoids, tear in bowel wall, bowel lining pushed outside, twisting of the bowel).
- Leakage (incontinence) of stool.
- Fecal impaction (hard stool completely or nearly completely obstructs the bowel).
- Loss of blood flow to the intestine, bowel perforation, severe infection, and death.

Symptoms of constipation include:

- Abdominal bloating or swelling, cramping, pain.
- Change in behavior (behavior as a response to abdominal discomfort).
- Straining at stool, stool that is small, hard, and difficult to pass.
- Pain, discomfort or blood with bowel movement.
- Liquid stool moves around the partial obstruction.
- Nausea, decreased appetite, weight loss, new reluctance to walk.

Prevention of constipation and maintenance of healthy bowel habits:

1. Develop regular bowel habits
 - Establish a toileting routine 5-15 minutes after a meal.
 - Allow time to sit undisturbed on the toilet (at least 15 minutes) to have a bowel movement and to develop regular bowel movement patterns.
 - Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement can lead to constipation.
2. Eat well-balanced, fiber-rich, meals on a regular schedule
 - Fiber-rich foods include unprocessed wheat and oat bran, whole wheat and whole grain bread, and fresh fruits (such as apples, raisins, uncooked prunes, blackberries, raspberries, dried apricots) and vegetables (such as corn, peas, beans, lentils, Brussels sprouts, squash).
3. Drink enough fluid, generally six to eight 8-ounce glasses of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic fluid per day.
4. Exercise, such as walking, running, swimming, or passive exercises for those with limited mobility or who are at bed rest.
5. Use of laxatives (bulk and osmotic), stool softeners, lubricants and enemas must only be done with the guidance of a physician or nurse. Drinking enough fluid is essential when using bulk laxatives (fiber supplements) and stool softeners.

Medical evaluation of constipation:

Symptoms of constipation that last longer than two weeks, symptoms of constipation that are severe (regardless of duration), changes in normal bowel habits, and complications of constipation should be evaluated by a physician.

Expect the physician or nurse to:

- Discuss the importance of normal bowel habits and the factors which influence bowel movements.
- Investigate for medical conditions that may be causing or contributing to constipation.
- Review medications that may be causing or contributing to constipation.
- Order diagnostic testing based on needs identified in their assessment.

Symptoms of bowel obstruction include:

- Abdominal pain ranging from mild to severe
- Vomiting – especially when repeated or having fecal odor
- Fever and chills
- Reluctant to eat
- Change in responsiveness or behavior
- Abdominal bloating or swelling, cramping
- Straining at stool

Remember:

- A person who vomits fecal material needs immediate medical attention.
- Diarrhea can occur with a fecal impaction or partial obstruction.
- Mild symptoms of constipation or obstruction can resemble the flu, so be aware of associated bowel habit changes and report them to your health care provider.
- It can be embarrassing for individuals to talk about problems related to constipation. It's important to provide guidance and support to individuals and allow them an active role in monitoring their diet, bowel movement schedules, etc. Some individuals can't communicate well regarding pain, and other indicators or bowel complications. It's up to the care provider to monitor them very closely and provide feedback to medical personnel immediately.

For questions or comments regarding the above Alert, please contact the MUI/Registry Unit at (614) 995-3810.

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