

**Office of Integrated Health
Health & Safety Information**

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**RECOGNIZING CONSTIPATION &
PREVENTING BOWEL OBSTRUCTION
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Recognizing Constipation

Constipation is a disorder that occurs when bowel movements become difficult or less frequent is frequently seen in many people. Individuals with developmental disabilities often have problems with chronic constipation as a result of but not limited to:

- Medication side effects
- Neuromuscular problems related to the person's disability

Signs of Constipation

- ✓ small infrequent bowel movements
- ✓ hemorrhoids due to straining with bowel movements
- ✓ increased abdominal girth
- ✓ abdominal pain

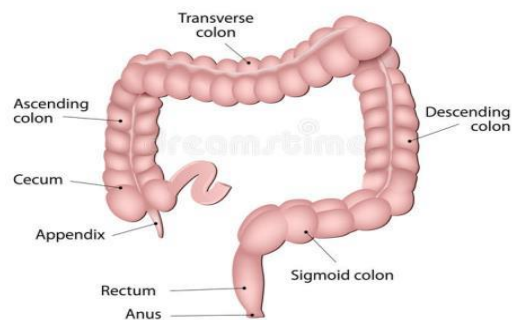
Chronic constipation

Chronic constipation must be addressed in all individuals. This can often be a silent problem, especially for individuals who are independent in toileting activities. Without treatment, chronic constipation can lead to bowel obstruction, bowel perforation and death.

Bowel Obstruction (Intestinal Obstruction)

A partial or complete block of the small or large intestine that keeps food, liquid, gas, and stool from moving through the intestines in a normal way.

ANATOMY OF THE LARGE INTESTINE



- Bowel obstructions may be caused by a twist in the intestines.
 - *Intestines are called the gut.*
 - *The large intestine includes the appendix, cecum, colon, and rectum and is 5 feet long. It absorbs water from stool and changes it from a liquid to a solid form.*
 - *The small intestine is where most digestion occurs. It measures about 20 feet and includes the duodenum, jejunum, and ileum.*
 - *Digestion is the process of breaking down food into substances the body can use for energy, tissue growth, and repair.*
- Hernias
 - *The bulging of an internal organ through a weak area or tear in the muscle or other tissue that holds it in place.*
- Inflammation
- Scar tissue from surgery
- Certain types of cancer
 - *A term for diseases in which abnormal cells divide without control and can invade nearby tissues. Cancer cells can also spread to other parts of the body.*
 - *Such as cancers of the stomach, colon, and ovary*
- Conditions that affect the muscles of the intestine, such as paralysis

Signs and symptoms of Bowel Obstruction

- ✓ Pain
- ✓ Swelling in the abdomen
- ✓ Constipation
- ✓ Diarrhea (*Frequent, loose, and watery bowel movements. Common causes include gastrointestinal infections, irritable bowel syndrome, medicines, and malabsorption.*)
- ✓ Vomiting
- ✓ Problems passing gas.

Prevention

Due to the often silent nature of this problem, staff must actively address this issue with individuals. Individuals who have been recognized to have problems with constipation should have bowel tracking logs for staff to document bowel movements.

Bowel Tracking Logs:

Recognition of worsening constipation is Key to treating the problem and maintaining the health of the individual.

Examples:

- Bristol Stool Scale
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK51939/>
- Form provided and / or approved by the individual's PCP

Assessment by Medical Professional

Those individuals not known to suffer from chronic constipation should be periodically assessed to assure that they are not developing problems with constipation.

Such as:

- Primary Care Practitioner (PCP)
- Gastrointestinal Specialist

Treatment Measures

Common treatment measures to address constipation include but are not limited to:

- Increasing physical activity



- Ensuring adequate fluid
- Ensuring fiber intake

Physicians can work with individuals who do not respond to these methods to find the most appropriate regimen to maintain regular bowel movements.

Role of Support Staff

Recognition of constipation

- Staff members have an important role in the recognition of constipation and / or chronic constipation through monitoring bowel movements.

Prevention

- They also have an important role in prevention. By following treatment plans of individuals suffering from chronic constipation they can help to prevent complications from developing.



When to Seek Medical Care

When any sign of Chronic Constipation is Observed Help is NEEDED!

Sometimes an individual with severe constipation will have what is called "overflow diarrhea." This is when an individual has a large firm stool within the rectum that they are unable to pass, yet liquid stool in small amounts may pass around this. This can often be missed and confused with an episode of diarrhea. If an individual with chronic constipation develops overflow diarrhea, decreased appetite, nausea, vomiting or moderate abdominal pain, they should be evaluated promptly by a physician. These are all signs that may indicate further complications from chronic constipation.

Additional information can be found at:

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/concerned-about-constipation>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMHT0027346/>