



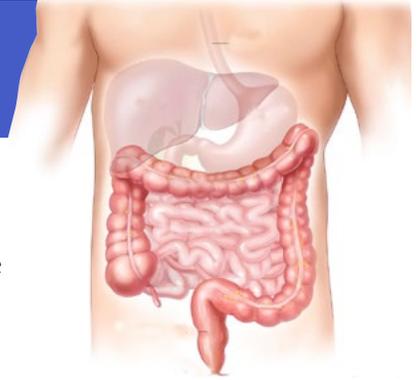
State of New Jersey  
**Department of Human Services**  
**Division of Developmental Disabilities**

# DDD PREVENTION BULLETIN

## Constipation

Constipation occurs when a person has fewer than three bowel movements a week and the stools are hard and/or the individual needs strain to pass them. Healthy persons may have bowel movements from three times a day to once every three days. A daily bowel movement is not necessary and there is no proof that waste stored in the gut is absorbed and is bad for health. However, if there are more than three days without a bowel movement, the problem can get

worse as the bowel contents tend to harden and become difficult to pass. This can cause pain and even small tears (fissures) in the anus (the bottom opening of the bowel), which may bleed or cause more pain making it even more difficult to have a bowel movement (Johnson, 2002).



### ***Why people with a developmental disability may be at a higher risk for constipation:***

- ◆ Neuromuscular degenerative disorders, such as cerebral palsy, that impair the central nervous system's response for the need to elimination;
- ◆ Spinal cord injuries or birth defects, such as spina bifida, that affect neural responses needed for elimination;
- ◆ People with muscle weakness, such as down syndrome, that lack the strength needed for adequate bowel function;
- ◆ People with mobility issues that lack the activity level needed to help the bowels function properly;
- ◆ Diets that do not contain adequate fiber and fluids;
- ◆ Poor swallowing skills that may make it difficult to eat and drink adequate amounts of fiber and fluids;
- ◆ Medication side effects can contribute to constipation. In particular, watch for constipation in persons who take antacids, anticonvulsants, antidepressants, tranquilizers, iron supplements, drugs for tremor, medication for urinary control or if the individual is using narcotics or other drugs for pain relief; and/or
- ◆ Lack of privacy. A regular private time for toileting is important, having regular times and habits aids with easy bowel movements.

## Most Common Signs and Symptoms of Constipation:

- ❖ Small hard lumps of stools
- ❖ Any bleeding from the anus
- ❖ Hard, protruding abdomen
- ❖ Sausage-like lumpy stools
- ❖ Refusing to eat or drink
- ❖ Difficulty passing stool
- ❖ Swelling or pain from abdomen
- ❖ Vomiting digested food that smells like feces

## SEVERE Constipation may lead to FECAL IMPACTIONS

### Additional symptoms include:

- ❖ Leakage of liquid or sudden episodes of watery diarrhea
- ❖ Bladder pressure/loss of bladder control
- ❖ Lower back pain
- ❖ Rapid heartbeat

## Strategies to Prevent Constipation:

- ▶ High fiber diet (20-35 grams/day)
- ▶ Adequate time for bowel movements
- ▶ Laxatives under medical supervision
- ▶ Proper positioning
- ▶ Regular exercise
- ▶ Adequate fluid intake
- ▶ Review medications for constipation as a side-effect
- ▶ Track BM frequency, consistency and volume
- ▶ Limit foods with no or little fiber (cheese, meat, processed foods)

In addition to the approaches listed above some experts suggest notifying a physician if a person is constipated for 3 or more days, or as directed by a physician if constipation occurs after beginning a new prescription, vitamin or mineral supplements accompanied by blood in stools, fever and/or abdominal pain.

## Sources

Johnson, Graeme. 2002. *From the Desk of the DDSN Medical Consultant*. 1:3. Columbia, SC: SC Department of Disabilities and Special Needs.

Delaware Division of Developmental Disabilities Services. (2011). *The Fatal Four: Constipation*. 4:9. Delaware: The Office of Training and Professional Development. Retrieved from [www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/ddds/files/learn\\_curve\\_oct11.pdf](http://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/ddds/files/learn_curve_oct11.pdf)

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000230.html>

<http://www.oxypowder.com/bristol-stool-scale.html>

Olmstead Resource Team



Physical Nutritional Management

