

**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.

- Bowel obstructions may be caused by a twist in the intestines.
- Hernias
- Inflammation
- Scar tissue from surgery
- Certain types of cancer
- Conditions that affect the muscles of the intestine, such as paralysis

Signs and symptoms of Bowel Obstruction

- ✓ Pain
- ✓ Swelling in the abdomen
- ✓ Constipation
- ✓ Diarrhea
- ✓ 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 recognized to have problems with constipation should have bowel tracking logs for staff to document bowel movements.

Bowel Tracking Logs

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

Common Treatment Measures *(examples only)*

- Increasing physical activity
- Ensuring adequate fluid
- Ensuring fiber intake

Primary Care Practitioners can work with individuals who do not respond to treatment measures such as these to find the most appropriate regimen to maintain regular bowel movements.

Role of Support Staff

- Recognition of constipation
- Prevention

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:

- ✚ National Institute on Aging (2013, Dec. 1). Concerned about constipation? Retrieved from <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/concerned-about-constipation>
- ✚ PubMed Health, U.S. National Library of Medicine (n.d.). Bowel obstruction (intestinal obstruction). Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMHT0027346/>
- ✚ Royal College of Nursing, National Collaborating Centre for Nursing and Supportive Care (2008). Irritable bowel syndrome in adults: Diagnosis and management of irritable bowel syndrome in primary care, Appendix I: Bristol Stool Scale. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK51939/>
- ✚ SMART Servier Medical Art (n.d.) Anatomy and the human body. [digital image]. Retrieved from <https://smart.servier.com/>

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