

MAY  
2009

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH/ DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES SUPPORTS DIVISION

# HEALTH ALERT

## BOWEL OBSTRUCTION ALERT!!!!!!

### Signs and Symptoms of

#### Small Bowel Obstruction

- **Abdominal pain**  
(waves of cramping pain around the naval; rapid breathing and rapid pulse during cramping)
- **Bloating**  
(gurgling sounds may be heard from the stomach)
- **Vomiting**  
(vomit can be green if the obstruction is in the upper small intestine or brown if the obstruction is in the lower small intestine)
- **Elimination Problems**  
(constipation and the inability to pass gas or diarrhea and some passing of gas)

### Signs and Symptoms of

#### Large Bowel Obstruction

- **Abdominal pain**  
(usually pain below the naval; can be either vague or mild or sharp and severe)
- **Bloating**  
(usually occurs around the naval and in the pelvic area)
- **Vomiting**  
(this is not common, it usually occurs late in the illness)
- **Constipation or Diarrhea**  
(either may occur depending on how complete the obstruction is)

**The symptoms of constipation and bowel obstruction can look like the "flu".**

### What is considered normal bowel function?

Normal frequency of bowel movements can range from 3 times a day to 3 times a week. A person's pattern of bowel movement is considered normal if it does not represent a change in the usual frequency or character of the stool and if passing stool is not associated with straining or pain.

### What is constipation?

Constipation is bowel movements that occur less than 3 times a week (less than every other day or every third day) OR stools that are small, hard and difficult to pass.

### What cause constipation?

Constipation can be caused by poor or irregular bowel habits, not drinking enough fluids, eating a diet low in fiber, physical inactivity, intestine or rectal surgery, many prescription and non-prescription medications, medical conditions such as stroke, cancer or hemorrhoids and increased emotional or physical stress.

### What is bowel obstruction?

A bowel obstruction is a partial or complete blockage in the intestines that prevents gas, fluids, or solids from moving through the intestines normally. Blockage can occur in the small intestine (a small bowel obstruction) or in the large intestine (a large bowel obstruction). In very severe cases the blood supply to the bowel can be cut off (bowel strangulation). This requires **immediate emergency medical treatment**. A bowel obstruction can be fatal if not recognized and treated in time.

### What causes a bowel obstruction?

A bowel obstruction can be caused by adhesions (bands of scar tissue from previous surgeries), tumors (growths) that block the bowel, bowel stricture (changes in the shape of the bowel), certain diseases, and certain medications.

### How can constipation be prevented?

- **Develop regular bowel habits** (schedule toileting after meals, allow 15 minutes of undisturbed time on the toilet and do not ignore the urge to have a bowel movement as this can lead to constipation)
- **Eat a well-balanced, fiber rich diet on a regular schedule**
- **Drink enough non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic fluids** (6-8, 8 ounce glasses per day)
- **Exercise**, such as walking, running, swimming or other passive exercises for those who have limited mobility or are restricted to bed rest
- **Take all laxatives, stool softeners, lubricants and/or enemas that are prescribed by the physician** (drinking enough fluids is very important when taking bulk laxatives [fiber supplement] and stool softeners)

### REMEMBER:

- **Symptoms of constipation that last longer than 2 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.**
- **Bowel Obstruction is ALWAYS fatal if not recognized and treated within 36 to 48 hours. (In addition, other fatal complications can develop from bowel obstruction such as sepsis, which is an infection throughout the body.)**
- **It is possible to have diarrhea (loose stools) and still have constipation or a bowel obstruction.**
- **Closely monitor an individual's bowel function if he/she has had recent abdominal surgery, injuries, medication changes, diet changes or changes in activity level.**