

# What you need to know about . . .

## Constipation and Bowel Obstruction

- **Constipation** occurs when a person has less than three bowel movements per week, although this varies from person to person. Stools are usually hard, dry, small, and difficult to pass.
- **Bowel Obstruction** is a partial or complete blockage of the small or large intestine.
- **Perforation** occurs when the intestine or bowel gets torn, which allows intestinal contents to enter the abdominal cavity. This condition is very dangerous and can quickly lead to serious infection.

Common issues that increase the risk of bowel obstruction:

- A person whose mobility is impaired and cannot walk around on their own;
- A person with muscle weakness or poor body alignment;
- A person who has difficulty eating or drinking;
- A person who does not eat enough fiber;
- A person who does not drink enough liquids;
- A person with cerebral palsy or similar diagnosis that can affect the muscles that move waste through the bowel;
- A person who has diabetes;
- A person with a degenerative condition, such as Parkinson's disease;
- A person taking medications that have a side effect of constipation;
- A person who does not have adequate time or privacy to use the bathroom.

Know the risks

# Know the signs

These are signs that a person may have a bowel obstruction:

- No passing of stool or gas;
- Leakage of small amounts of watery stool;
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Abdominal cramps, often felt in waves;
- Abdominal distension (bloated stomach) or hardened abdomen;
- Seizures.

## Know what to do

Prevention Strategies:

- Consultation with a physician about a constipation protocol, frequency of bowel movements for this person, and what treatment is recommended (such as laxatives or enemas);
- Consultation with a dietitian;
- Carefully follow all diet orders and document what the person eats;
- Ensure that the person consumes adequate fiber and liquids daily;
- Keep accurate bowel tracking and ensure that it is regularly monitored;
- Make sure that any symptoms of constipation are communicated and documented between shifts;
- Make sure all staff work together to help the person receive the medications they need, including PRN medications;
- Support the person in staying as active as possible;
- Make sure the person has adequate time and privacy for using the toilet.

### **IN AN EMERGENCY:**

**Call 9-1-1 if a person:**

- vomits stomach contents or digested food that smells like feces;
- has low blood pressure and/or a very rapid pulse;
- loses consciousness (becomes unresponsive).



State of Georgia  
Department of Behavioral Health  
and Developmental Disabilities

This Constipation and Bowel Obstruction Fact Sheet is # 2 in a series of Improving Health Outcomes Fact Sheets. It was developed with reference to resources available through the Arizona Division of Developmental Disabilities Quality Assurance Unit and the Illinois Department of Human Services. This Fact Sheet is not a substitute for clinical evaluation or physician's orders.