

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 factors that increase the risk of bowel obstruction occur when a person:

- Has impaired mobility and cannot walk around on his/her own
- Has muscle weakness or poor body alignment
- Has difficulty eating or drinking
- Does not eat enough fiber
- Does not drink enough liquids
- Has cerebral palsy or similar diagnosis that can affect the muscles that move waste through the bowels
- Has diabetes
- Has a degenerative condition, such as Parkinson's disease
- Takes medications that have a side effect of constipation
- 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:

- Consult with a doctor about a constipation protocol, frequency of bowel movements for this person, and what treatment is recommended (such as laxatives or enemas)
- Consult 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 movement 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 he/she needs, including PRN medications
- Help the person stay 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)

