

* This handout provides information to help you manage constipation in a child with disabilities *

Common Symptoms of Constipation:

- Hard stools
- Infrequent bowel movements (the *average* frequency of stools in most children decreases from 4 per day in the first week of life to 1-2 per day by age 2 years)
- Pain and/or straining when passing stools

Common Causes of Constipation:

- Decreased movement/mobility
- Decreased innervation to the intestines
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Taking medicines that cause constipation (iron, diuretics, narcotics/codeine, anticholinergics, and others)
- Behavioral retention
- Anatomic malformations

Common Complications of Constipation:

- Pain and irritability
- Worsening Gastroesophageal Reflux
- Increasing Spasticity
- Decreased weight gain because of early satiety
- Rectal bleeding
- Urinary tract infection

What You Can Do:

- Have Patience – months of treatment are usually needed to restore normal function and most treatment failures result from too little treatment for too short a time
- Evacuate/Clean out the bowels first to help restore their muscle tone using digital stimulation, suppositories, enemas, and/or medications as directed by your doctor
- Make sure your child's diet includes foods that are high in fiber, like fresh vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.
- If your child gets tube feedings, try using a formula with fiber
- Increase your child's activity level as much as possible to stimulate bowel movement.
- Make sure your child gets enough liquids to drink (especially apple, pear, prune, and purple grape juices)
- Consider using maintenance doses of stool softeners, or bowel stimulants as recommended by your doctor
- Make sure your child has a toilet seat that provides enough support to make him/her feel secure.
- Try having your child sit on the potty about half an hour after a meal or at other regular times each day.

References and Resources:

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- Mason, D, Santoro, K, & Kaul, A (1999) Bowel Management. In *Children with Spina Bifida- A Parent's Guide*, Lutkenhoff, M (Ed) pp.88-105. Woodbine House, Bethesda, Maryland
- <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/digest/pubs/const/const.htm>
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