The Bowel Movement
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Bowel obstruction has a wide variety of causes and often results in the need for hospitalization or surgery. It is the most common cause of preventable death in individuals with ID/DD in community settings. This article will help identify some of the issues that lead to constipation and bowel obstruction in this population and give information about prevention and early response.

Bowel obstruction occurs when the large or small bowel becomes partially or completely blocked. While there are many causes, the primary issue in people with ID/DD is chronic constipation. The controllable factors that most commonly contribute to this are:

• Diet
• Medications
• Lack of movement

Dietary contributors to constipation include lack of sufficient dietary fiber and/or inadequate fluid intake. There are also several foods that can either inhibit or promote normal bowel function. Most nutritionists recommend a daily fiber intake of 25 to 40 grams, preferably from regular foods rather than from psyllium or other artificial sources. Good sources of dietary fiber are fruits, vegetables and nuts WITH skins, whole grains products and many kinds of beans and legumes. Meat, eggs and many processed foods do not contain fiber. Fiber content is part of the information displayed on food nutrition labels.
Obtaining adequate amounts of fluid is also crucial in assisting with prevention of constipation. Inadequate fluid intake can result in hard, compact stools that are difficult to pass. Water is of course the best beverage, though many people do not particularly care for it. Milk and juice are also good sources but may be unacceptable due to intolerance or high sugar content. Coffee, tea and soda are less desirable because they are high in caffeine and acid, which are dehydrating to the body. Alcoholic beverages act as a diuretic. Recommended fluid intake varies widely depending upon the individual’s gender, size, age and overall health. Several sources recommend approximately 2.5 liters per day for women and 3 liters per day for men.

Almost 2/3 of all drugs, whether prescription or over the counter, have anticholinergic properties either as an intended effect or a side effect. This means that they dry out secretions and interfere with the contraction of smooth muscle, including the stripping action of the GI tract. Given that persons with disabilities and the elderly are the most over-medicated people in our nation, it is no surprise that they suffer from constipation at such an alarming rate. Use of medications to relieve constipation causes the gut to lose its enthusiasm for doing its job and, in the long run, make the problem worse rather than better. An important step in preventing constipation and bowel obstruction is to eliminate all drugs that are not strictly necessary. The healthiest persons with disabilities are on the fewest medications.

Another issue is the lack of active movement, particularly if we are aging or have physical disabilities. The bowel needs the stimulus of movement and the assistance of gravity to increase its enthusiasm for doing its job. Positions that stimulate the abdomen and increase active movement are also helpful to stimulate the gut. A 30 minute walk every day may also be beneficial for persons with the motor skills to do so.

Any person with a history of bowel obstruction needs particular care and surveillance as the bowel now has scar tissue that makes a repeat obstruction highly likely. Knowing the person’s normal bowel habits and responding quickly when they vary is important when factors like medications and immobility cannot be improved. Also important is training direct care providers to recognize and respond to the signs and symptoms the person exhibits when going into a pattern of impaction or obstruction. These can include loss of appetite, abdominal bloating or distention, and complaints of significant abdominal pain. Behavioral signs, including irritability and self-injury are also not uncommon. While preventing the problem is the most desirable, intervening at the earliest possible sign of a problem is essential to a successful outcome.
High Fiber Fruit Butter & Trail Mix Recipe

Here are some of the recipes we’ve recommended over the years to enhance the fiber intake of family, friends, colleagues and the individuals they serve. They are quite tasty and can be used in a variety of ways.

Be sure to encourage extra fluids and do not increase daily fiber intake by more than 6-7 grams/day for each two week period. For example, if baseline is 8-10 grams per day, go to 14-16 per day for two weeks and then bounce up to 20-22 for the next two weeks and then to 26-28 for another two weeks.

For each 6-7 grams of fiber increase, add another 8 ounces of non-dehydrating fluid.

The Fruit Butter recipe has been around for quite some time. It is very adaptable and can be eaten with a spoon, spread on toast or bread, mixed in with applesauce or pudding or served warm over oatmeal or ice cream. It can even be mixed with lemonade or another juice and frozen to make popsicles. The limit is only your culinary imagination!

Fruit Butter

2 cups raisins
3 ¼ cup prunes with juice
¼ cup honey
1 tsp. vanilla
½ cup apple juice
Soak overnight, then drain, place in food processor for 3 minutes
Serving size- 2 ½ ounces daily in am
Servings per batch- 16 @ 8 grams of fiber per serving

This trail mix recipe was created circa 2006 when Karen Green McGowan and her associate were doing a sweeping round of bowel training for one of their state clients. So many high fiber foods are not particularly palatable to those who most need them. We carried this around to all of our training sessions for several years and can report that almost everyone LOVES it and they experienced the desired effect of enhanced fiber intake!
Trail Mix

1 lb. raw almonds
1 lb. raw walnuts or pecans
2 cups raisins
2 cups dried cranberries
2 cups unsweetened coconut flakes
1 box Fiber One cereal
1 box Fiber One Honey Clusters cereal
1 bag bittersweet chocolate chips

This recipe can be altered according to taste or for those who are allergic to any of the ingredients. Make sure that any replacement ingredients used are also high in fiber. This recipe makes a very large batch and freezes very nicely. Two ounces contains 6 or 7 grams of fiber.