

BOWEL OBSTRUCTION

A bowel obstruction can be an extremely serious and dangerous condition. If not treated promptly, it can cause death within a few hours. A bowel obstruction is any blockage in the bowel that prevents bowel contents from passing through.

What are some of the risk factors?

- **Abdominal surgery** may cause scar tissue to develop that can contribute to blockage
- **Cancer or tumors** can increase the risk
- **Congenital abnormalities** (problems at birth) of the bowel
- A history of **constipation**
- **Poor dietary habits** (food and fluid): Adequate fluids are needed to prevent the body from reabsorbing fluid from the bowel which, in turn, causes the stool to be hard. Adequate roughage is needed to stimulate muscle activity in the bowel to push the stool along.
- **Lack of adequate exercise** due to physical restrictions: An air-fluid lock can collect in the bowel loops and the smooth muscle of the bowel may be too weak to push the fluid along. Exercise helps strengthen those muscles.
- **Medications** can cause constipation as a side effect.
- **Age:** older adults are more susceptible

What are the symptoms of bowel obstruction?

- **Lack of appetite**
- **Severe, sharp, intermittent abdominal cramping or pain**
- **Vomiting.** It may be frequent, sudden in onset, abundant, foul in odor.
- **Lack of stool (bowel movement)**
- **Dehydration (may be due to vomiting)** Signs of this may include intense thirst, drowsiness, general malaise, achiness, parched tongue, sunken eyes, fever)
- **Abdominal distention or bloating**

How can I prevent it?

- **Know the person's medical history.** If they have a history of any of the listed risk factors, closely monitor them for signs and symptoms of obstruction.
- **Consult with the person's Health Care Provider to determine if an exercise regimen** is indicated and support the person in following it.
- **Ensure that the person gets adequate fluids.** Everyone should consume **at least** eight 8-ounce glasses of non-caffeine beverages per day. People should drink more in warm weather.
- **Consult with the person's Health Care Provider or dietician regarding the amount of fiber** or roughage that should be included in their diet.
- **Monitor for constipation.** If the person cannot reliably self-monitor or self-report or if more than one person is responsible for the care of the person, it is recommended that a monitoring and documentation system be in place to consistently provide a record of the person's bowel habits that can be shared with the Health Care Provider.

What do I do if I see any of these signs and symptoms?

- Notify the person's Health Care Provider
- If the symptoms are serious or the individual looks extremely ill, call 911
- Inform whoever may be treating the person of their bowel habits, risk factors, and last bowel movement.

For a medical workup, an X-ray may be recommended. Frequently, though, if bowel obstruction is likely, further imaging with a CT scan is warranted. Care providers need to provide accurate, timely information to health care practitioners to ensure prompt and effective intervention.

