From Dr. Escudé...

Constipation and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

Constipation is a relatively common condition that most people can resolve on their own. In people with IDD, constipation is more frequent and can cause a number of behavioral conditions and complicate medical ones. If a person has a limited ability to communicate with words, they may communicate with behaviors. It’s important to rule out treatable, medical conditions like constipation before starting someone on a medication to control their behavior.

Some behaviors that might be associated with constipation include:

- Refusal to eat
- Physical or verbal aggression without a definite antecedent
- Rocking
- Not being able to sit still (up and down)
- Hitting one’s self in abdomen
- Being in a fetal position when lying down
- Having their knees drawn up to their chest when sitting
- Abdominal guarding

Some complications of constipation in people with IDD include:

- Fever
- Anorexia due to gastrointestinal upset
- Vomiting
- Increase in seizure frequency
- Medication Intoxication due to longer medication transit time
- Decreased level of consciousness
- Pneumonia secondary to aspiration from vomiting
- Behavioral outbursts due to pain or discomfort
- Death due to a bowel obstruction or complications of some of the other conditions listed above

Classes of medications that can contribute to constipation include:

- Anti-Epileptic Drugs
- Antipsychotics
Some ways to improve bowel functions include:

- Adequate intake of fluids
- Adequate intake of fiber
- Increasing mobility
- Positioning to facilitate gastrointestinal motility (PT/OT referral)

When these are not effective, a number of medications can be used to help facilitate bowel movements. However, because of the possibility of dependency on these medications to have a bowel movement, their use should be limited, if possible. These measures include:

- Stool softeners
- Irritants
- Osmotics
- Suppositories
- Enemas

Manual dis-impaction is another method often used to relieve a fecal impaction

Promoting good gastrointestinal motility and bowel movements can go a long way to improving and health and well-being. Thanks for your careful attention to helping improve the lives of people we support.

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Dr. Escudé has dedicated his career to providing healthcare for people with IDD and other vulnerable populations and teaches on the subject throughout the country.