From Dr. Escudé...

The Impact of Active Movement and Positioning on Bowel Function

Most of us have an understanding of how the lack of movement effects how our bowels respond when we sit for extended periods of time on planes, trains or automobiles. We may complain about blowing up like a balloon or being very unpopular with our seatmates. The fact is that the smooth muscle that makes up our GI tract needs the massage of movement to function as it should. Even a brisk walk can assist with peristalsis.

For individuals who do not move well on their own, such as those with cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, or spinal cord injury, physical and occupational therapists have much to offer in assisting with constipation and can provide fairly simple interventions that offer relief and prevention of the more severe complications of lack of action along this 23-24-foot channel.

The prone, or belly-down, position is one that not only stimulates active movement, but also provides stimulus to the gut from the weight of the body on the anterior surface of the body. When this position is implemented in a way that allows weight-bearing on the forearms and assists the head to work on spinal extension, there is a tendency for the bowel to move its contents along the traditional route.

Quadruped on forearms is the position we often see babies push into around 8 or 9 months just before they begin to move on hands and knees in a contralateral pattern. This position can be provided to individuals with movement issues using a “drop-off wedge”, allowing the head to come to mid-line and work on active extension, with the rest of the spine actively moving as well. The gut is benefiting by not only the active movement, but the stimulus of the trunk weight transmitting stimulus to the bowel.

Most of us who have assisted severely involved individuals into some type of prone positioning have experienced the outcome of this stimulus, which involves the active movement of gas, or other bowel contents as we help the person move in prone.

This is not an intervention that is taught in most schools of PT or OT. This is usually something that experience has taught these clinicians, and the physician who prescribes these treatments may have to provide some
additional support to ensure that these treatments are done in a way that is helpful.

For those who are more mobile, a simple 30-minute walk each day can make a tremendous difference in bowel function. Sit-ups can put stimulus directly into the gut and increase peristalsis. In fact, any type of movement that involves the large muscles of the body will inevitably assist with bowel function as well.

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.