



## Overview of Bowel Health & the Older Adult

Education for Health Care Professionals

Part 2: Causes of Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Constipation & Diarrhea



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## Factors Affecting Bowel Activity Overview

- Aging > chronic disease(s) and comorbidities can prolong bowel transit time
- Environment > lack of privacy, inaccessible facilities, need for reliance on others
- Personal habits > disruption of a “routine”(e.g. same time daily, after a hot drink)
- Diet > Unhealthy or nutrient deficient diet and/or inadequate fluid intake
- Medications
- Disability > physical (mobility & activity), impaired cognition, mental health (anxiety, depression)
- Poverty > inability to purchase healthy foods & living conditions
- Poor dentition > formation of teeth and bite
- Disease > chronic or acute, neurologic disorders

(JBI, 2008; RNAO, 2011)



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## Abnormalities of Fecal Elimination



- Changes in patterns of elimination are symptoms of functional disorders or disease processes.
- Most common changes are:
  - fecal urgency & incontinence
  - diarrhea
  - constipation

[Department of Health and Ageing, 2013](#)

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## Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBD): Causes

- The cause of IBD is not known. This syndrome can cause the contractions walls of the intestines to be stronger and last longer than normal, causing gas, bloating and diarrhea. Or the opposite may occur, with weak intestinal contractions slowing food passage and leading to hard, dry stools.
- Abnormalities in the gastrointestinal nervous system may play a role, causing greater than normal discomfort when the abdomen stretches from gas or stool.
- Poorly coordinated signals between the brain and the intestines can make the body overreact to the changes that normally occur in the digestive process causing pain, diarrhea or constipation.

[\(Mayo Clinic 2014\)](#)

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## Constipation: Causes >>

Some of the reasons for constipation include:

- poor diet, lack of adequate fluids intake, lack of exercise, the use of certain drugs to treat other medical conditions, and poor bowel habits.
- The person afflicted often experiences a lack of interest in eating, common in single or widowed older people. This leads to over use of convenience foods, which tend to be low in fibre.
- Tooth loss may make eating regular meals difficult and many older adults thus choose soft, processed foods that are low in fibre.
- Many older adults suffer from urinary incontinence and stress incontinence. They may reduce fluid intake in order to avoid urinating. This compounds the problem as water and other fluids add bulk to stools, relieving constipation and making stools soft.

(Mandal 2017)

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## Constipation: Causes

- Another major cause for constipation in older individuals is prolonged bed rest or being bed ridden, for example, after an accident or during an illness. Lack of movement and exercise may contribute to constipation.
- Fearing constipation can lead to older people to becoming dependent on stimulant laxatives.
  - these are not only habit forming but the bowel movement process begin to depend on laxatives and over time, the natural mechanisms fail to work without the help of drugs
  - habitual use of enemas also can lead to a loss of normal bowel movements

(Mandal 2017)

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## Diarrhea: Causes >>

A number of diseases and conditions can cause diarrhea, including:

### Viruses

- Viruses that can cause diarrhea include Norwalk virus, Cytomegalovirus and viral Hepatitis.

### Bacteria and Parasites

- Contaminated food or water can transmit bacteria and parasites to your body
- Parasites such as Giardia lamblia and Cryptosporidium can cause diarrhea.
- Common bacterial causes include Campylobacter, Salmonella, Shigella and Escherichia coli.
- Clostridium difficile infection can occur, particularly after a course of antibiotics.

### Lactose Intolerance

- Lactose is a sugar found in milk and other dairy products. People who have difficulty digesting lactose experience diarrhea after eating dairy products.
- The body makes an enzyme that helps digest lactose, but for most people, the levels of this enzyme drop off rapidly after childhood. This causes an increased risk of lactose intolerance as you age.

(Mayo Clinic 2016)

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## Diarrhea: Causes

### Fructose

- Fructose, a sugar found naturally in fruits and honey and added as a sweetener to some beverages, can cause diarrhea in people who have trouble digesting it.

### Artificial sweeteners

- Sorbitol and mannitol, artificial sweeteners found in chewing gum and other sugar-free products, can cause diarrhea in some otherwise healthy people.

### Surgery

- Some people have diarrhea after undergoing abdominal surgery or gallbladder removal surgery.

### Chronic Diseases

- Chronic diarrhea has a number of other causes, such as Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, celiac disease, microscopic colitis and irritable bowel syndrome

(Mayo Clinic 2016)

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## Urgency & Incontinence

### FECAL URGENCY

Contributing factors are:

- loose, runny stools
- poor control of the anal sphincter
- certain types of foods

### **Fecal Incontinence**

Influenced by:

- amount & consistency of stool (presence of diarrhea/ loose stool)
- poor muscle tone
- impaired mobility & chronic health conditions

### FECAL IMPACTION

Often seen in patients with long-term constipation.

- It is a major complication of constipation and common in incapacitated institutionalized older adults.
- It may present with nonspecific symptoms such as anorexia, vomiting and abdominal pain and requires a management program to prevent reoccurrence.

(Department of Health and Ageing, 2013)



## Fecal Impaction: Causes

### **Fecal Impaction**

A solid, immobile bulk of feces that can develop in the rectum as a result of chronic constipation.

- Persons at risk for fecal impaction include those who:
  - Are immobile and/or do not move around much and spend most of their time in a chair or bed
  - have diseases of the brain or nervous system that damage the nerves that go to the muscles of the intestines
  - are on certain drugs slow the passage of stool through the bowels such as anticholinergics, which affect the interaction between nerves and muscles of the bowel
  - take medicines used to treat diarrhea, if they are taken too often
  - Are taking narcotic pain medication, such as methadone and codeine

(TNYT, 2011)



## Blockages of the Colon

Blockages in the colon or rectum may slow or stop stool movement.

Causes include:

- anal fissure
- bowel obstruction
- colon cancer
- narrowing of the colon (bowel stricture)
- other abdominal cancer that presses on the colon
- rectal cancer
- rectum bulge through the back wall of the vagina (rectocele)

[\(TNYT, 2011\)](#)

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## Neurological

Neurological problems can affect the nerves that cause muscles in the colon and rectum to contract and move stool through the intestines causing impaction or blockage of the colon.

Causes include:

- Autonomic neuropathy
- Multiple sclerosis
- Parkinson's disease
- Spinal cord injury
- Stroke

[\(TNYT, 2011\)](#)

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## Hormone Imbalance

Hormones help balance fluids in your body.

Diseases and conditions that upset the balance of hormones may lead to constipation, including:

- Diabetes
- Overactive parathyroid gland (hyperparathyroidism)
- Underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism)

[\(TNYT, 2011\)](#)

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## Medical Conditions: Causes

There are a number of medical conditions that can affect the function of the bowel. Some of these conditions can manifest themselves in similar ways to constipation and incontinence, so it is important to seek help from your doctor or a continence advisor to identify the cause of your bowel problem.

Some of these conditions can be:

- Bowel cancer
- Colitis
- Diverticulosis and diverticulitis
- Hemorrhoids
- Rectocele

[\(AGDH\)](#)

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## Medications and Constipation



Antihypertensives, analgesics & antidepressants can contribute to **constipation** through their anticholinergic effects.

Common examples are:

- Opioids/analgesics (e.g. Morphine, Codeine)
- Antacids (e.g. Mylanta)
- Antidepressants (e.g. Zoloft)
- Iron & Calcium supplements
- Antihypertensive agents
- Antiparkinsonian agents (less common)

(RNAO, 2011)

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## Medications and Fecal Incontinence (FI)



Many common drugs can cause diarrhea.

- Drugs such as:
  - antibiotics
  - antidepressants
  - antacids
  - proton pump inhibitors
  - medicines used to treat cancer (chemotherapy)
- A more serious type of diarrhea caused by the bacteria *Clostridium difficile* may occur while taking the antibiotic or shortly after finishing the antibiotic.

(Web MD 2015)

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### Bowel Dysfunction Impact on QoL

- Bowel dysfunction impacts an individual's quality of life (QoL) in 3 main areas.
  - Physical
    - gastrointestinal changes that make it hard to pass stools, loose stools, diarrhea or leakage for example, affect the person's ability to socialize and leave their home
  - Psychological
    - depression whereby individuals may experience worry about a voiding mishap, leading to social isolation as well as body image concerns
  - Financial
    - there are increased health care costs associated with the purchase of additional personal care supplies and ultimately a person's ability to live independently

(Bradley, 2012)

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