

Constipation

The Fatal Four

There are four major health issues that impact individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities at a greater rate and with more severity than those in the general population.

It is important for all direct care and support staff, including DSPs and QIDPs, to familiarize themselves with these conditions as, unaddressed, they may worsen quality of life and even cause preventable death in persons residing in communal IDD homes.

The Fatal Four conditions are: **aspiration, constipation, dehydration and seizures.**

Constipation

Constipation refers to decreased intestinal functionality, typically defined by absent bowel movements for ≥ 3 days or having ≤ 3 bowel movements a week. Notably, normal bowel routines are highly personal, so this broad definition should not be strictly applied to all residents. To promote patient-tailored care, constipation should be considered whenever a resident's bowel movement frequency and success (ability to void the bowels) vary strongly from their norm.

While constipation may be merely uncomfortable to the otherwise healthy patient, IDD residents are often more prone to exhibiting worse secondary complications.

Complications

- Bowel Obstruction (life threatening)
- Fecal Impaction
- Rectal Prolapse
- Hemorrhoids
- Intestinal Perforation (life threatening)
- Anal fissures
- Rectal bleeds

To prevent constipation and risk of these complications

review these reminders on **WHO** is at greatest risk for constipation, **WHAT** the signs of constipation are, and **HOW** to respond if constipation is suspected!

Risk Factors

The following factors indicate WHO is at greater risk for constipation:

- **Poor dietary habits** that cause insufficient fluids and/or fiber consumption
- **Swallowing disorders** that limit fluid/fiber intake
- **Poor toileting habits** that negatively influence bowel function and routine (i.e., lack of privacy or necessary equipment)
- **Inactivity/immobility**
- **Neuromuscular conditions** or **poor muscle function/tone** may obstructs resident's ability to completely evacuate their bowels
- **Female** biologic sex
- **Pregnancy**
- **Certain Medications** that slow transit of stool though the intestinal tract (i.e., iron supplements, opioids pain relievers, antihistamines, etc.)

Constipation

Constipation Signs/Symptoms

Similar to older adults with cognitive impairment, clinical manifestation of constipation amongst IDD residents is often atypical and requires an accurate history of the resident's normal toileting habits as supplied by a caregiver.

Support Professionals should be familiar with WHAT signs are a warning for constipation in the IDD resident:

- Hard or lumpy stools
- Infrequent bowel movements
- Excessive time on the commode
- Straining on the commode
- Anorexia
- Abdominal bloating or pain
- Sensation of incomplete bowel movement
- Change in daily function, routine or change in behavior around toileting

Interventions

Support Professionals should be familiar with HOW to respond to residents suspected of constipation with these interventions:

- **Support a well-balanced diet** by providing affected individuals with high fiber, low fat options. A qualified nutritionist may be helpful in directing this intervention.
- **Encourage physical activity** to prevent immobility and to increase muscle tone and strength.
- **Increase fluid intake** to prevent constipation due to dehydration.
- **Minimize sodium intake.** Excess sodium can cause the intestines to resorb water in effort to achieve water/electrolyte balance, further drying out stool and causing constipation. A qualified nutritionist may be helpful in directing this intervention.
- **Schedule upright position time**, especially for individuals with postural or locomotive deficiencies.
- **Consider medication side effects** that might influence constipation. A qualified pharmacist may be helpful in directing this intervention.
- **Track bowel movements** for residents at risk or suspected of constipation. Recording bowel frequency and stool consistency will enable early identification of constipation and allow you to intervene before complications arise.
- **Support healthy toileting habits** such as allowing time, privacy, and necessary equipment to promote successful bowel movements in your IDD residents. Establishing a toileting routine at certain times of the day can help promote healthy bowel habits.