



## BRIEFINGS FOR CARERS

# CONSTIPATION

## What is constipation?

Constipation is characterised by:

- Not having a poo for 3 or more days
- Not having a poo at least 3 times in a week
- Having poo that is sometimes difficult to push out without straining
- Having poo that is larger than usual, dry, hard or like pellets OR after a long time between poo's passing lots of soft, smelly poo

## Constipation can be dangerous because:

- There is a risk of developing longstanding (chronic) problems
- Over time the bowel may become very distended (like a big saggy bag) and hold a lot of smelly poo. When poo is eventually passed it is loose, like diarrhoea. Sometimes, laxatives are then stopped so the poo backs up in the bowel again. There is a cycle of 'no poo' for many days followed by a huge poo
- Very occasionally the bowel becomes so big it can burst or outgrow its blood supply. This is life-threatening.

## Recognising constipation

It is very important that constipation is treated quickly before it becomes a big problem. If a person can't tell you about their pooing, you will need to observe and record their bowel movements. Watch out for:

- Stomach ache, cramps and/or bloating
- Behavioural change – this may be the only way a person with a learning disability tells you they are constipated
- loss of appetite, nausea or vomiting
- rectal bleeding or pain
- soiling of underwear from leaking of poo (overflow diarrhoea) – where constipation causes poo to partially block the person's bowel and watery poo from higher up in the bowel leaks out around the blockage. It can look like diarrhoea, but is a warning of severe constipation
- Some medicines can cause constipation eg painkillers, anti-depressants and anti-psychotics
- **THINK and TALK constipation –it may save a life**

## Managing constipation

Eat a health diet including bran, oats, fruit & veg. Drink plenty of fluids

Regular exercise – helps the bowel to work and maintain a normal weight

Regular toileting - keep to a regular time and place for toileting but don't delay if the urge to poo is felt

Allow plenty of time to use the toilet and relax. To make it easier to poo, rest feet on a low stool while on the toilet

Ask GP to check for health conditions and medicines that cause constipation

Check with GP whether abdominal massage might be helpful

Laxatives are medicines to help a person have a poo. Ask the GP or pharmacist for advice. Sometimes laxatives are needed long term and should not be stopped without medical advice

Ensure prompt treatment for constipation is given and check if the constipation gets better. See the GP if not.

## Constipation can be life-threatening

**Call 999 or go to A&E if:**

**Stomach ache comes on very suddenly or is severe**

**Stomach remains bloated, or is hard or painful to the touch**

**Person is vomiting blood or vomit looks like ground coffee or diarrhoea**

**Poo is bloody or black and sticky and extremely smelly**

**The person can't poo or fart at all**

