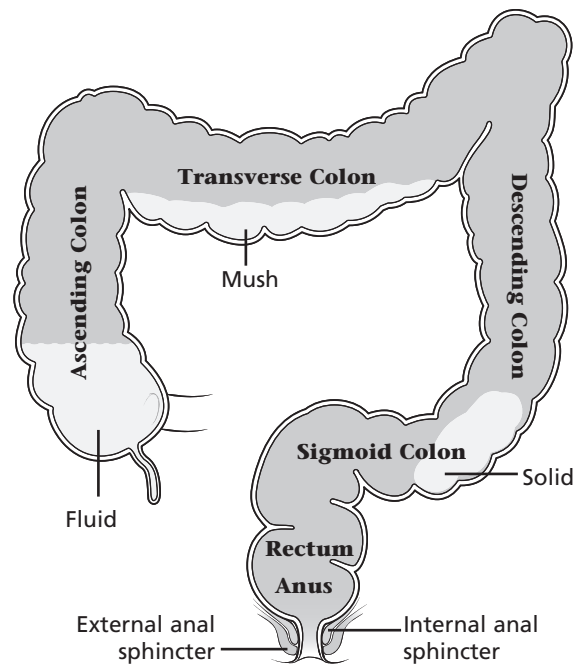
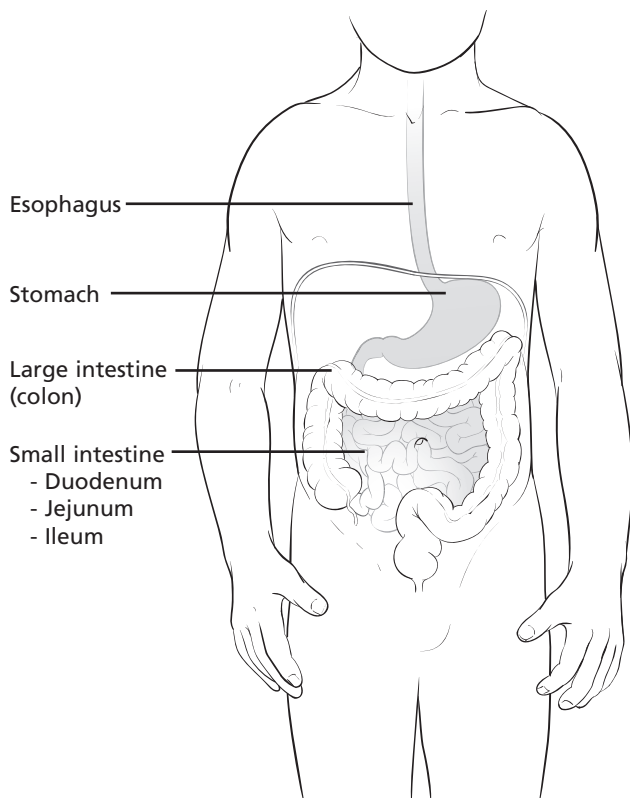


Let's Talk ABOUT...

Spina bifida and bowel management



Almost all children with spina bifida, even those who can walk, have trouble with bowel control. Bowel management can help your child to prevent accidents and to have regular formed bowel movements. To manage your child's bowels, you will need to understand how the bowel functions. You will also need to know the factors that contribute to a successful bowel program. Keeping your child on a bowel management program takes patience, time, and hard work. However, the rewards are worth the effort.

How does the bowel work?

Digestion breaks food down into smaller parts that can be used by the body. This begins in the mouth when you chew your food. The chewing and saliva break the food down into small parts. Swallowing

moves the smaller pieces of food into the esophagus, which leads to the stomach. In the stomach, chemicals break the food down further. The food then goes to the small intestine, where it is broken down again into vitamins, minerals, and waste products. In the small intestine, the body absorbs water, salts, vitamins, and minerals. The food then moves through the small intestine to the large intestine, where waste products are stored until they are eliminated.

Food and waste material move along the small and large intestines by a wave-like motion called peristalsis. This motion moves food forward causing waste material to leave the large intestine and enter the rectum (the last part of the large intestine). As the rectum stretches, an internal sphincter (ring-like

muscle) relaxes and allows stool to pass. This is an involuntary reflex (no control over action) that sends a message to the brain that elimination is about to occur. An external sphincter leading out of the rectum has a voluntary reflex (control over action) stimulated by the stretched rectum. The body responds to this reflex by keeping the valve closed until a proper place to empty is available.

Why do children with spina bifida lack bowel control?

Both the internal and external sphincter is affected by spina bifida. Nerves that control these sphincters are the lowest on the spinal cord. Therefore, an opening anywhere along the spinal cord can cause these nerves to not work.

The internal sphincter may not be able to detect the presence of stool. Therefore, no message is sent to the brain. The external sphincter may not get a message from the brain to hold or release stool. As a result, the stool is not eliminated from the body. This means that children with spina bifida do not know when their rectum is full and needs to be emptied. Consequently, they need a regular elimination program to prevent accidents.

What are some problems caused by lack of bowel control?

Constipation

Constipation is the difficult passing of hard ball-shaped stools. It occurs because the movement of stool through the colon has slowed. This slowing results from:

- A diet low in fiber
- Inactivity
- Inadequate fluid intake
- Irregular and incomplete emptying
- Anesthesia-surgery
- Pain medications

Impaction

Impaction occurs when large clumps of stool collect in the colon. This makes elimination more difficult.

The impaction causes the colon to enlarge, decreasing muscle tone. The urge to empty also decreases. Sometimes diarrhea-like stool occurs, because liquid seeps around the clumps of stool. This condition requires a complete clean out of the colon with enemas before a bowel management program can be started.

Diarrhea

Children with spina bifida have diarrhea for the same reasons as other children. For example, they may have diarrhea because of illnesses, certain foods, or “anxiety.” They also may have diarrhea because of impaction described above. The weak external sphincter allows stool to “leak” anytime there is stool in the rectum.

Skin problems

Constipation and diarrhea can cause skin problems. Passing hard large stools can tear the skin around the anus (opening from the rectum). Liquid stool causes rashes and sores around the opening to the rectum.

How can my child avoid problems with bowel management?

Bowel management is important and begins early in your baby’s life. A successful program depends on:

- Good stool consistency
- Regular emptying times
- Independence

The following bowel management steps will help your child develop bowel control:

- 1** Teach your child to avoid constipation starting from infancy.
- 2** Feed your infant the right foods to keep the stool soft and easy to push out.
- 3** Teach your child to drink enough fluids and eat the right foods.
- 4** Teach your toddler about using the potty chair for bowel movements. Help her establish a regular emptying time.
- 5** As your child gets older, help her stay on a schedule. This will result in fewer accidents.

Over time your child will be able to manage without assistance.

How do I start a bowel training program?

The information in this handout provides general information about bowel training. The Spina Bifida Clinic will set up a specific program according to your child's age, abilities, and needs. You will be given much guidance and instruction. It is very important to remember that bowel training does not occur overnight but represents months and sometimes years of patient hard work. There are ups and downs, days that are discouraging, and incidents (e.g., illness, surgery) that cause interruptions in the process. However, the final goal of control (no accidents), independence, and good stool consistency is attainable. It will help your child be more involved and be accepted by her peers.