Let's Talk About...

Bowel (colon) cleanout

What is a bowel cleanout?

A bowel cleanout is a way to empty stool (poop) from the colon (the last part of the bowel).

Why does my child need a bowel cleanout?

Your child may need a bowel cleanout because there is stool (poop) retained (stuck) in your child's intestines. Retained stool can cause cramping and the stool may become hard, dry and difficult to pass. Passing hard stool can be painful and frightening for a child. The experience can lead to fear of going to the bathroom. Withholding stool, followed by passing large, hard painful stool often becomes a cycle.

How is a bowel cleanout done?

A bowel cleanout in the hospital is usually done with enemas and a liquid called GoLytely®. When your child first goes to the hospital, he will have an X-ray of his tummy. This lets the medical team know how much stool is present and where it is in the colon (part of the intestines). Then your child will receive an enema. Your child's nurse will place liquid in a bag with a tube attached. The tube is about the size of a pinky finger. The nurse will gently place the tube into your child's rectum. Then the fluid flows into the colon and it softens the stool there. Then your child can pass the stool. Your child will probably receive more than one enema during the bowel cleanout.

A large amount of GoLytely liquid must go into the stomach in a short period of time to work properly. Most children do not like the taste and can't drink all the GoLytely necessary. For these reasons, most children have a tube placed to give the liquid directly into the stomach. The tube is placed through the nose into the stomach. This is an NG or nasogastic (nay-zo-GAS-trick) tube and will only stay in as long as your child receives the fluid.

The GoLytely will go in to your child's stomach continuously after the NG tube is in place. Your child will receive the liquid until his stool has no more visible particles. This is the way to tell the stool is all cleaned out from the colon. Your child will then receive another x-ray of his tummy to show the colon is cleaned out.

How do I help prepare my child?

You can prepare your child by explaining what will happen. Talk to him about the NG tube. Your child will not receive sedation when the tube is put in place. Let him know that he may not be able to make it to the bathroom in time during the procedure and may have accidents. Let him know this is okay.

Are there complications or side effects?

The most common side effects of a colon cleanout are nausea (feel like throwing up) and possibly vomiting. This is from the large amounts of Go-Lytely going into the stomach and intestines. If this happens, the nurse will slow down the GoLytely liquid. Some children have cramps as old hard stool gets soft and starts to move through the colon.

When can my child go home and what do I need to do at home?

Your child may go home after the stool is cleaned out from the colon. Your doctor will give you a bowel program to begin at home to help prevent further constipation. This program will include milder cleanouts, stool softeners, and a toilet-sitting schedule.

What if I have more questions?

If you have any questions, please ask your nurse or doctor.

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