

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. When your child learns to control their bowel, they can help prevent accidents and have regular bowel movements.

How does the bowel work?

The bowel, also called the intestines, absorbs nutrients from your food. Here's how it fits into the digestion process:

- You break your food into small pieces by chewing and mixing it with saliva.
- When you swallow, you move the smaller pieces of food into the esophagus, which leads to the stomach.
- Chemicals break the food down further in the stomach.
- The food goes to the small intestine and breaks into vitamins, minerals, and waste. The body absorbs water, salt, vitamins, and minerals.
- The food moves to the large intestine, where waste is stored until your child has a bowel movement.
- Through a wave-like motion called peristalsis, waste enters the rectum (the last part of the large intestine).
- As the rectum stretches, an internal sphincter (ring-like muscle) relaxes and allows stool (poop) to pass. It sends a message to the brain that the stool needs to leave the body.
- The body responds by keeping the external sphincter closed until your child has reached a toilet.

Why do children with spina bifida lack bowel control?

Spina bifida affects both the internal and external sphincters. Nerves that control these sphincters are the lowest on the spinal cord. Because of this, 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 and does not send a message 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 children with spina bifida do not know when their rectum is full and needs to be emptied. They need a bowel training 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 stool is moving more slowly through the colon. Constipation is caused by:

- A diet low in fiber
- Inactivity

- Not drinking enough liquids
- Not emptying the bowel regularly or completely
- Anesthesia and surgery
- Pain medications

Impaction

If your child is constipated often, impaction can happen. Large clumps of stool collect in the colon, which makes it harder to pass stool. Sometimes impaction causes diarrhea-like stool, because liquid seeps around the clumps of stool. Your child will need their colon cleaned out with enemas before starting a bowel management program.

Diarrhea

Children with spina bifida may have diarrhea because of illnesses, certain foods, or anxiety. They also may have diarrhea because of impaction. 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 can cause rashes and sores around the anus as well.

How can my child avoid bowel control problems?

It's important to help your child learn to control their bowels early. A successful program depends on:

- Good stool consistency
- Regular emptying times
- Independence

Here's how to help your child develop bowel control:

- 1 Feed your baby the right foods to keep the stool soft and easy to push out.
- 2 Teach your child to drink enough fluids and eat the right foods.

- 3 Teach your toddler to use the toilet for bowel movements. Help them establish a regular emptying time.
- 4 As your child gets older, help them stay on a schedule. This will result in fewer accidents. Over time, your child will be able to control their bowel without help.

How do I start a bowel training program?

Healthcare providers at the spina bifida clinic will set up a specific program for your child's age, abilities, and needs. They will help you teach your child.

Bowel training does not happen overnight. It can take months and sometimes years of patient, hard work. You will face discouraging days and incidents like illness or surgery that interrupt training. However, your child can reach the final goal: no accidents, independence, and good stool consistency.

Notes

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