

## 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

