Abdominal Massage to Decrease Constipation

Constipation is a condition that sends many people to their doctor each year. Constipation is defined as hard, lumpy stools that occur less than 3x per week and are difficult to pass. Bowel motility describes how long it takes the food we eat to move through the digestive system. The last section of the digestive system is the large intestine; a U-shaped tube made of smooth muscles. These smooth muscles contract to move intestinal material through the tube and towards the end, which is called the rectum.

Factors that decrease bowel motility and contribute to constipation may include: decreased activity levels, not enough water or fiber in the diet, some medications, stress, and the pregnancy-related hormone progesterone.

When patients are constipated or have “slow bowel motility”, they sometimes complain of feeling the need to strain to move their bowels. You should not have to strain! Constipation and straining can contribute to urinary or possibly fecal leakage.

Abdominal massage has long been used to increase bowel motility for those with constipation.

Abdominal massage is a way to create gentle external pressure along the intestinal tract, which stimulates intestinal contractions (called peristalsis) and helps get the intestinal material to the rectum before it gets hard and dry. Daily abdominal massage can help increase how often you move your bowels, and can make bowel movements easier to pass.

Contraindications: (do NOT do abdominal massage if you have any of the following)

1. Known or suspected bowel obstruction.
2. Large abdominal mass, unless given physician approval.
3. Abdominal radiation in past six weeks
4. Recent abdominal surgery.
5. If advised against massage by physician.

When Should You Do Abdominal Massage? It is recommended that you wait at least an hour after eating. The massage technique can be performed at night before bed or first thing in the morning. If you experience pain or bloating after meals, you can perform a gentler version of this technique with slightly less pressure, immediately after eating, to decrease your symptoms.
WHO SHOULD USE ABDOMINAL MASSAGE: Men, women or children with constipation.  
WHEN: Performed in the evening is best, but you can do at other times if needed.  
POSITION: Lying on your back with pillows under the knees, in a reclined sitting position, or while lying on your side  
DURATION: 5-10 minutes a day  
FREQUENCY: Repeat as needed throughout the day (1-2x)  
INTENSITY: Feeling “pressure” is okay, if you feel pain, you are pressing too hard; decrease the intensity of the abdominal massage if you feel pain.

TECHNIQUE:  
1. Massage in small circles with enough pressure to indent the skin.  
2. Start just inside the RIGHT hipbone (where you put your hands on your hips). Work your way up the abdomen, stay along the outside edge, stopping just below the rib cage.  
3. Travel ACROSS the abdomen to the left side, stay underneath the rib cage. Avoid the xyphoid (a small piece of cartilage at the bottom of the breast bone).  
4. Continue down along the LEFT side of the abdomen, finish just inside the left hipbone (where you put your hands on your hips).  
5. Move back over to your starting position and repeat steps 1-4.  
6. Continue making circles along this U-shaped path for 5-10 min. Repeat as needed throughout the day.

Adapted from Harrington K, Haskvitz E. Managing a patient’s constipation with physical therapy. Physical Therapy. 2006; 86:1151-1159.

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