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FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Constipation Awareness

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 054

Version 1.0

First Published: August 2026



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Introduction

Constipation is a common condition that affects many people receiving health and social care, particularly older adults, individuals with reduced mobility and those living with long-term health conditions. While it may seem like a minor problem, constipation can cause significant discomfort and, if left untreated, may lead to serious health complications.

Constipation can affect an individual's appetite, mobility, mood and overall wellbeing. It may also contribute to pain, urinary problems, confusion or delirium, particularly in older adults. Care staff play an important role in recognising the early signs, promoting healthy bowel habits and reporting concerns promptly so that appropriate support and treatment can be provided.

Providing person-centred care and encouraging healthy daily routines can help reduce the risk of constipation and improve an individual's comfort and quality of life.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding constipation awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise the early signs and symptoms of constipation.
 - Promote healthy bowel habits through good daily care.
 - Encourage adequate hydration and a balanced diet where appropriate.
 - Support mobility and physical activity whenever possible.
 - Recognise when constipation may indicate a more serious problem.
 - Follow individual care plans and organisational procedures.
 - Report concerns promptly to the appropriate healthcare professional.
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Key Message

Constipation should never be dismissed as a normal part of ageing. By recognising the signs early, encouraging healthy lifestyle measures and reporting concerns promptly, care staff can help prevent unnecessary discomfort, reduce the risk of complications and support an individual's health, dignity and wellbeing.

Understanding Constipation

Constipation occurs when bowel movements become less frequent than usual or when stools are hard, dry and difficult to pass. Every individual has different bowel habits, so it is important to recognise what is normal for each person rather than relying on a fixed pattern.

Constipation is common in older adults and may be caused by reduced mobility, dehydration, a low-fibre diet, certain medications or underlying health conditions. Early recognition and appropriate support can help prevent discomfort and more serious complications.

Care staff should always follow the individual's care plan and encourage healthy daily routines that support normal bowel function.

Supporting Healthy Bowel Function

Care staff can help reduce the risk of constipation by:

- Encouraging adequate fluid intake in accordance with the individual's care plan.
- Promoting a balanced diet that includes fibre where appropriate.
- Encouraging regular physical activity and movement whenever possible.
- Supporting individuals to use the toilet when they need to, without unnecessary delay.
- Respecting privacy and dignity during all aspects of personal care.
- Observing bowel habits and recording any significant changes.
- Following bowel monitoring or bowel management plans where these are in place.
- Reporting concerns promptly to the appropriate healthcare professional.

These simple measures can help maintain healthy bowel function and improve comfort and wellbeing.

Remember

Constipation can sometimes be an early sign of illness or may lead to serious complications if left untreated. By encouraging healthy daily routines, observing changes in bowel habits and reporting concerns promptly, care staff help protect an individual's health while promoting safe, dignified and person-centred care.

Professional Responsibilities

Every care worker has a responsibility to recognise the signs of constipation and provide safe, compassionate and person-centred support. Constipation can affect an individual's comfort, dignity and overall health, and if left untreated may lead to more serious complications. Care staff should always work within the limits of their training, competence and organisational policies.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat every individual with dignity, privacy and respect.
- Follow the individual's care plan and any bowel management plan.
- Encourage adequate hydration and a balanced diet where appropriate.
- Promote mobility and physical activity whenever possible.
- Support individuals to access the toilet promptly when needed.
- Observe and accurately record bowel habits and any significant changes.
- Report concerns promptly to your manager or the appropriate healthcare professional.
- Work within the limits of your role and seek advice whenever you are unsure.

Providing sensitive and proactive support helps maintain comfort, protects dignity and promotes healthy bowel function.

When to Raise Concerns

You should report concerns immediately if:

- An individual has not opened their bowels for several days and this is unusual for them.
- They experience persistent abdominal pain, bloating or discomfort.
- There is blood in the stool or bleeding from the rectum.
- They develop nausea, vomiting or a swollen abdomen.
- They become unusually confused, restless or generally unwell.
- They strain excessively or experience pain when opening their bowels.
- You notice any sudden or significant change in normal bowel habits.

Prompt reporting allows appropriate assessment and treatment, helping to prevent more serious complications.

Good Practice Reminder

Constipation is a common but potentially serious condition that should never be overlooked. By encouraging healthy daily routines, recognising changes early, maintaining accurate records and reporting concerns promptly, care staff play an important role in protecting an individual's health, comfort and wellbeing while delivering safe, dignified and person-centred care.

Summary

Constipation is a common condition that can have a significant impact on an individual's comfort, health and wellbeing if left untreated. Early recognition, healthy daily routines and prompt reporting of concerns are essential to help prevent complications and support safe, person-centred care.

Care staff play an important role in observing changes in bowel habits, encouraging hydration, promoting a balanced diet and supporting mobility wherever possible. By following individual care plans and recognising when additional support is needed, care staff help protect an individual's dignity, comfort and overall quality of life.

Constipation Awareness Checklist

- ✓ Encourage adequate hydration in accordance with the individual's care plan.
 - ✓ Promote a balanced diet with appropriate fibre intake.
 - ✓ Encourage regular movement and physical activity where possible.
 - ✓ Support individuals to use the toilet promptly when needed.
 - ✓ Observe and accurately record bowel habits.
 - ✓ Follow bowel management plans where these are in place.
 - ✓ Report persistent constipation or any significant changes promptly.
 - ✓ Treat every individual with dignity, privacy and respect.
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Further Information

For further guidance on constipation, visit:

NHS – Constipation

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/constipation/>

NICE – Constipation in Adults

<https://www.nice.org.uk>

Care Quality Commission (CQC)

<https://www.cqc.org.uk>

Bladder & Bowel UK

<https://www.bbuk.org.uk>

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