Bowel Management in Multiple Sclerosis

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Bowel dysfunction is common in multiple sclerosis (MS) and is reported by approximately 60% of those with the disease. Both constipation and involuntary bowel movements may occur, with constipation being by far the more frequent complaint.

MANAGEMENT OF CONSTIPATION

Constipation can be reduced by a stepwise process beginning with a search for possible iatrogenic factors (side effects of medications) and assessment for the presence of neurogenic bladder dysfunction, followed by progression through: a) basic natural measures such as fluid and dietary intake, b) mechanical techniques such as digital stimulation and enemas, and c) medical interventions if necessary (see Algorithm A). In order to permit a true evaluation of effectiveness, sufficient time (up to four weeks) should be allowed for each of the regimens before moving to the next step. More extreme surgical procedures, which are indicated in rare cases, should be addressed by a gastroenterologist.

Medication Review

Several categories of medication can precipitate or exacerbate constipation, and a review of medications should be the first step in evaluating constipation.

- Antihypertensives
- Anticholinergics
- Analgesics/narcotics
- Sedatives/tranquilizers
- Tricyclic antidepressants
- Some antibiotics
- Antacids
- Diuretics
- Iron supplements

Bladder Management and Fluid Intake

If bowel and bladder dysfunction are occurring in tandem, bladder problems should generally be addressed first. Many patients practice fluid restriction in an attempt to control distressing urinary
symptoms such as frequency, urgency and incontinence. Once urinary dysfunction is no longer a major problem, it will be possible to work with the patient to increase fluid intake in order to prevent desiccated stool, which is difficult to move along the gastrointestinal (GI) tract and to evacuate. The generally recommended fluid intake is 2000 ml/day.

Diet-Fiber, Bulk Formers, and Concentrated Sugar Preparations

In addition to fluids, prune juice and/or dried fruits are the easiest, and often most effective dietary measures. Sufficient dietary fiber is also essential. If a high fiber diet (25 grams/day for females and 38 grams/day for males) cannot be achieved, bulk supplements such as Metamucil, FiberCon, Perdiem, Benefiber, or Citrucel can be used. One or two glasses of clear fluid (e.g., water, apple juice, broth, tea) should be taken with these agents for full benefit. Six to 8 glasses of fluid should be consumed daily to facilitate movement of the bulk supplement and prevent potential impaction.

Liquid sugar concentrates (Sorbitol and Lactulose) are another natural intervention. These products act by drawing water into the intestine, thereby softening the stool. Preparations include Sorbitol, Lactulose, and Golytely. Side effects are rare, making these agents useful for long-term management.

Behavioral Interventions

- Educate to promote adherence to whatever plan is developed.
- Initiate and maintain a regular program of physical exercise.
- Schedule a regular time for evacuation that takes into account the person’s normal frequency and takes advantage of the gastrocolic reflex 20–30 minutes after meals, especially breakfast.
- Integrate the planning with the person’s life style and cultural mores. Promote confidence that bowel problems can generally be successfully managed.

Oral Agents

A variety of oral agents facilitate the passage of stool through the GI tract:

- Colace (docusate 100 mg)
- Surfak (docusate 240 mg)
- Peri-Colace (docusate and casanthranol)
- Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia
- miraLAX (polyethylene glycol 3350)
Suppositories

Suppositories can be used to evacuate stool.

- Glycerin suppository
- Bisacodyl suppository

The patient or caregiver must be instructed to insert the suppository against the rectal wall and not into the stool.

Manual stimulation

- Digital stimulation by the person with MS or the caregiver will stimulate the rectum for stool evacuation. If done properly, it can be used long term.

Enemas

Most useful is the mini-enema: Therevac-SB, Therevac Plus, or Colace microenema. Fleet or tap water enemas should be reserved for episodic use.

**IN VOLUNTARY BOWEL/FECAL INCONTINENCE: CAUSES AND MANAGEMENT**

Involuntary bowel or fecal incontinence can result from several pathologic situations: sphincter dysfunction, constipation with rectal overload and overflow, and/or diminished rectal sensation. Fecal incontinence is often associated with constipation. Constipation distends the rectum and interferes with compliance. Therefore, much of the management of involuntary bowel is similar to that for constipation. However, there are factors to consider first when fecal incontinence is reported (see Algorithm B).

Dietary irritants such as caffeine and alcohol should be considered as contributing factors, and eliminated when present. In addition, medications that reduce spasticity in striated muscle (primarily baclofen and tizanidine) may be contributing to the problem and their dose or scheduling may need to be adjusted.

Bulk agents used regularly will promote fecal consistency.

Anticholinergic drugs can be helpful when a hyperactive bowel is the underlying cause of incontinence. Since these drugs also affect bladder function, careful initiation and titration are needed, and post-void residual urine volume should be monitored to avoid precipitating urinary retention.

Diarrhea may lead to bowel incontinence, since it is difficult for the sphincter to contain liquid stool. If diarrhea is a regular problem, the cause needs to be identified. Impaction is a common component, with viral and bacterial causes also possible.

*See Bowel Algorithms A and B on the following pages*
ALGORITHM A

CONSTIPATION

Adjust medications

Medications causing or contributing?

NO

Treat bladder symptoms

Urinary symptoms controlled?

YES

Early interventions
- 2 L fluid intake daily
- Diet-fiber/bulk formers/sugar preparations
- High fiber balanced diet
- Physical activity
- Regular time of evacuation

NO

Constipation relieved?

YES

END

Sequential trials
- Stool softeners
- Mild oral laxatives
- Suppositories/digital stimulation
- Enemas

NO

Constipation relieved?

YES

END

NO

Refer to gastroenterologist
ALGORITHM B

IN Voluntary Bowel (IB)

Diet: Caffeine? Alcohol?

YES

Eliminate dietary irritants

IB relieved?

YES END

NO

NO

Antispasticity medications?

YES

Adjust medications

IB relieved?

YES END

NO

NO

Bulking agents

IB relieved?

YES END

Anticholinergics (must monitor bladder function)

IB relieved?

YES END

NO

Refer to gastroenterologist
SUMMARY

Most instances of constipation and involuntary bowel in MS can be managed with systematic persistence on the part of both the patient and clinician. It is important to remember that bowel dysfunction, like other MS symptoms, can change over time, and that referral to a gastroenterologist is appropriate when conservative measures have been unsuccessful.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


The National Multiple Sclerosis Society acknowledges Teva Neuroscience and Novartis for their educational grant support of this bulletin.