

Intestinal Obstruction

What is intestinal obstruction?

Intestinal obstruction is when there is a blockage in the small or large intestine that prevents food from passing through.

What problems can it cause?

The most serious complication of intestinal obstruction is a loss of the blood supply to the digestive tract. This can cause part of the intestine to die. When this happens, the pressure can cause a leak that spreads bacteria into the body or blood stream. This kind of infection can be life threatening.

What are the signs of an obstruction?

The most common symptoms are not being able to pass gas or have a bowel movement, and nausea, vomiting, bloating, abdominal swelling, and pain. The pain of intestinal obstruction usually comes in sharp waves and then gets better for awhile.

Who is at risk of an obstruction?

People who have had abdominal surgery are at risk because of scar tissue from the

surgery. Hernias can cause an obstruction.

Tell your doctor if you have ever had a hernia.

Obstructions can also be caused by a tumor, so your doctor may want to do tests to rule this out.

What should I do if I think I have an obstruction?

Call your doctor right away or go to the emergency room.

What will my doctor do?

Your doctor will examine you and ask questions about your medical history, including any surgeries. He or she may order some tests and an x-ray or computed tomography (CT) scan. Obstruction is usually treated by running a tube through the nose into the stomach. It is important to get plenty of fluids, so you will have an IV started. You may need to be seen by a surgeon to decide if an operation is needed to relieve the obstruction.

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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