

Diarrhea Caused by Severe Constipation

Jeff H. Ye, MD, PhD

A 70-year-old woman with history of diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, obesity, sleep apnea, diabetic peripheral neuropathy and kidney diseases, gastric ulcer and GERD came to me for regular follow-up. She recently had a fall with back pain. She went to see a neurosurgeon and conservative treatment was recommended. Some pain medication was prescribed to help control the back pain.

She initially developed some constipation and was managed with over-the-counter laxative by herself. But in the last 2 weeks, she noticed that she had diffused abdominal pain with intermittent nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. She felt embarrassed to tell me that she had several accidents with fecal incontinence.

With her complicated medical problems in mind, I proceeded to do upper and lower endoscopies. I did not give her strong colonoscopy prep because she claimed she had diarrhea with 6-7 bowel movements per day. To my surprise, her stomach was basically normal. She had a large amount of solid stool in her colon despite of colonoscopy prep. I told her that all her symptoms were caused by severe constipation. She did not believe that she had constipation because she had 6-7 bowel movements every day. I explained to her the pathophysiology/mechanism of all her symptoms in detail, and finally she understood that constipation was the cause of her diarrhea. She was willing to try the medication I prescribed to her. She came back in 2 weeks and told me that all her symptoms have been resolved.

A 12-year-old child was brought to my clinic by his mother for severe constipation. He had not had bowel movement for 2 weeks and started having nausea and vomiting. He was not able to eat and drink as he did before. He complained of diffused abdominal pain and distension. He was admitted to hospital for treatment. His constipation was resolved. He was discharged home and instructed to take laxative to keep daily bowel movement. One month later, he was brought to my clinic by her mother again with complaints of frequent small diarrhea with nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and distention. He became dehydrated again. He was admitted into hospital and EGD showed minimal gastritis and abdominal X-ray showed large amount of hard stool throughout his colon. He was diagnosed with severe constipation with overflow diarrhea. His large bowel was cleaned again and he was instructed to continue using strong laxative to keep daily bowel movement.

Severe constipation with overflow diarrhea is commonly misdiagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome with diarrhea; treatment was usually not helpful, and often makes the problem much worse. The right treatment is to solve the constipation, not the overflow diarrhea. If you have difficult constipation and diarrhea, please contact Dr. Jeff Ye, North Atlanta Medical & Digestive Care at 770-346-0900. We can help!