

Article 3159

Overview

An enema is a way of cleaning out the large intestine, which is called the colon or bowel. Various solutions are inserted into the rectum to soften the stool. This causes the colon and rectum to stretch and contract and helps the bowel to empty.

Who is a candidate for the procedure?

Enemas may be given:

- » to relieve constipation. Enemas may be given at home by the person, a family member, or a visiting nurse.
- » to prepare for an exam of the rectum or colon, such as a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy
- » prior to surgery on the bowel
- » prior to certain X-ray procedures, such as a barium enema. A barium enema is a series of X-ray films that shows the colon after a contrast agent is inserted in the rectum.

Enemas used to be given to anyone having surgery and to women who were in labor. This practice is no longer common.

How is the procedure performed?

The person will be asked to lie on his or her left side. The right leg should be bent up toward the chest. This position helps the enema solution flow easily into the colon. The solution most commonly used is a mixture of mild soap and warm water, and is known as a soapsuds enema. This solution is placed into a small plastic container with a flexible tube. Lubricating jelly is applied to the tip of the tube. The tube is then gently inserted into the rectum about 4 to 6 inches. Next, the solution is slowly released through the tube into the bowel. A fleets enema is a small, prefilled enema with a prelubricated tip. An oil retention enema is useful for hard stool, because the stool absorbs the oil and is softened.

What happens right after the procedure?

After an enema, the person is asked to hold the solution in the rectum for at least 3 minutes. After this time, he or she can expel the enema while sitting on a toilet or bedpan. The results should be evaluated to be sure that the enema was successful.

What happens later at home?

If the enema was given for constipation, the person should check his or her bowel movements for further constipation. If the enema was given to prepare for surgery or for an exam, it may need to be repeated. The goal of this type of enema is to cleanse the bowel. It needs to be repeated until there is no fecal matter expelled after the enema. After a barium enema, the person will have white stool for a short time as the body expels the barium.

What are the potential complications after the procedure?

Sometimes a person may feel faint while having an enema. A more serious risk is a perforated colon, but this is very rare. A perforated colon occurs when the tip of the enema pokes through the colon and causes damage to the tissue. Occasionally small amounts of blood are seen after an enema from mild trauma or irritation of the hemorrhoidal veins.