

Intestinal Obstruction

There are many possible causes of intestinal obstruction (or blockage) in children. The intestine becomes blocked off, partially or completely, interfering with normal bowel movements. Intestinal obstruction is sometimes present at birth. In other cases, it develops later as a result of illness, injury, or a malformation of the intestines. Prompt treatment is needed to restore the function of the intestines and prevent complications.

What is intestinal obstruction?

Intestinal obstruction is blockage somewhere along the intestinal tract (small or large intestine). Infants may be born with intestinal obstruction. This can result from malformations (abnormal development) of the intestines or from conditions that interfere with the intestine's normal emptying ability.

The intestines may be blocked completely or partially. Partial obstructions may be less easily recognized. Intestinal obstruction requires prompt treatment to prevent complications, including permanent damage to the intestines. If the blockage cannot be removed in any other way, surgery must be performed as soon as possible.

What does it look like?

The symptoms of intestinal obstruction vary a lot, depending on the cause. Some symptoms are present at birth or shortly afterwards, whereas others develop later on. Some of the main symptoms are:

- Vomiting, especially of yellowish-green material (bile).
- Episodes of sudden, intense crying caused by abdominal cramps. Vomiting is common but may not be the first symptom (for example, intussusception).
- Belly sticking out (distended abdomen).
- Lack of the normal first bowel movement (meconium) after birth. In some conditions, the meconium stool passes, but normal bowel movements don't start after that (for example, Hirschsprung's disease).



Intestinal obstruction can lead to serious complications, including infections and shock. For some causes of intestinal obstruction, or if serious damage to part of the intestine (gangrene) has occurred, surgery must be performed as soon as possible.

What causes intestinal obstruction?

There are many possible causes:

- *In newborns and infants*, blockage may result from:
 - Various malformations of the intestines, which means the intestines didn't develop normally.
 - Atresia (lack of normal intestinal passages).
 - Stenosis (narrowing of the intestines).
 - Malrotation (twisting of part of the intestines).
 - Intussusception (part of the intestine gets stuck in another part).
 - Hirschsprung's disease (lack of normal nerve cells in the large intestine).
 - Blockage of the intestines with meconium (which babies normally pass as their first bowel movement after birth). This occurs mainly in infants who have the genetic disease cystic fibrosis.
- *In older infants and children*, blockage may be caused by:
 - Hernias (part of the intestine slipping through a hole in the muscle wall).
 - Foreign bodies: objects that children swallow may block the intestines.
 - Adhesions: scars after surgery that narrow or block the intestines.
 - Paralytic ileus: lack of normal intestinal function after surgery or injury.

What are some possible complications of intestinal obstruction?

Intestinal obstruction can lead to serious complications, including infections, perforations (holes in the intestine), or death of the involved part of the intestine (gangrene). Prompt treatment is needed to relieve the blockage and prevent these complications. 

What puts your child at risk of intestinal obstruction?

Risk factors depend on the cause of the obstruction:

- Many types of intestinal malformations are more common in infants with other birth defects or genetic diseases.
- Any type of abdominal surgery increases the risk of adhesions.

How is intestinal obstruction treated?

- Intestinal obstruction must be treated as soon as possible to restore normal intestinal function and reduce the risk of complications.



- If your child has symptoms of obstruction, seek medical care immediately.
- Treatment depends on the cause; surgery may be needed (for example, if your child has an inguinal hernia or a malformation of the intestines).



When should I call your office?

If your child has been treated for intestinal obstruction, call our office if similar symptoms occur again (for example, vomiting of bile, swollen abdomen, lack of bowel movements, abdominal cramps).