Chapter 35

Drugs Used to Treat Constipation and Diarrhea

Learning Objectives

• State the underlying causes of constipation
• Explain the meaning of “normal” bowel habits
• Cite nine causes of diarrhea
• Describe medical conditions in which laxatives should not be used

Learning Objectives (cont’d)

• Identify electrolytes that should be monitored whenever prolonged or severe diarrhea is present
• Describe nursing assessments needed to evaluate the patient’s state of hydration when suffering from either constipation or dehydration

Constipation

• Infrequent, incomplete or painful elimination of feces

“Normal” bowel habits vary
  - Daily bowel movement not necessary
  - As long as patient’s health is good and stool not hardened or impacted, this is acceptable

Constipation (cont’d)

Causes
  - Improper diet
Too little fluid intake
Lack of exercise—sedentary habits
Failure to respond to normal defecation impulses
Muscular weakness of the colon
Diseases such as anemia and hypothyroidism
Frequent use of constipating medicines
Tumors of the bowel or pressure from tumors
Diseases of the rectum

- Diarrhea
- An increase in the frequency of fluid content of bowel movements

- Diarrhea (cont’d)

- Causes
  - Intestinal infections
  - Spicy or fatty foods
  - Enzyme deficiencies
  - Excessive use of laxatives
  - Drug therapy
  - Emotional stress
  - Hyperthyroidism
  - Inflammatory bowel disease
  - Surgical bypass of the intestine

- Treatment of Altered Elimination
- Constipation
- High-fiber diet, adequate hydration, exercise
- Use of laxatives should be avoided

• Treatment of Altered Elimination (cont’d)

• Diarrhea: treatment depends on specific cause of diarrhea, which may be:
  - Chronic, mild or severe
  - Indication of disease of stomach, small or large intestine
  - Psychogenic
  - Symptom of cancer of the colon or rectum

• Treatment of Altered Elimination (cont’d)

• Nursing process
  - Assessment: obtain history, medications, activity and exercise, elimination patterns, nutritional history, basic assessment, vital signs; review lab reports
  - Monitor electrolytes in prolonged diarrhea
  - Monitor hydration

• Learning Objectives

• Identify the indications for use, method of action, and onset of action for stimulant laxatives, saline laxatives, lubricant or emollient laxatives, bulk-forming laxatives, and fecal softeners

• State the differences between locally acting and systemically acting antidiarrheal agents

• Learning Objectives (cont’d)

• Cite conditions that generally respond favorably to antidiarrheal agents

• Review medications studied to date and prepare a list of those that may cause diarrhea
• Laxatives

• Stimulant laxatives
  ▪ Act directly on intestines; promote peristalsis and evacuation
  ▪ Used to relieve acute constipation and routine elimination of gas and feces before radiologic examination of kidneys, colon, intestine, or gallbladder

• Laxatives (cont’d)

• Saline laxatives
  ▪ Hypertonic compounds draw water into the intestines from surrounding tissues, distending bowel and causing peristalsis

• Laxatives (cont’d)

  ▪ Fecal softeners: draw water into bowel to soften stools; do not cause peristalsis
    • Used routinely for prophylactic purposes
  ▪ Bulk-forming laxatives
    • Drug of choice for those who use laxatives routinely; they absorb irritating substances and soften stools
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• Laxatives (cont’d)

  ▪ Lubricant laxatives
    • Lubricate intestinal wall, allowing for smooth passage of fecal contents
    • Used as prophylactic for patients who should not strain during defecation

• Laxatives (cont’d)
Antidiarrheal Agents

Locally acting agents
- Absorb excess water to cause a formed stool and absorb irritants or bacteria causing diarrhea

Systemic agents
- Act through autonomic nervous system to reduce peristalsis and motility of the GI tract, allowing the mucosal lining to absorb nutrients, water, and electrolytes, leaving a formed stool

Antidiarrheal Agents (cont’d)

Help control inflammatory bowel disease

Postgastrointestinal surgery patients may require agents to help absorb electrolytes and fluids

Many cases are self-limiting but may be prescribed by health care professionals

Antidiarrheal Agents (cont’d)

Medications That May Cause Diarrhea

Antibiotics

Antacids containing magnesium