

What is a Small Bowel Obstruction?

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is the small bowel?

The small bowel, or small intestine, is the major organ in the body for digestion. It consists of three sections. The first portion, called the duodenum, connects to the stomach. The middle portion is the jejunum. The final section, called the ileum, attaches to the first portion of the large intestine.

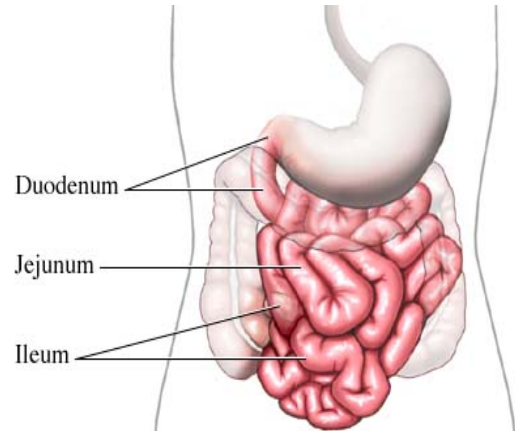


Image Source: yalenewhavenhealth.org

What is a small bowel obstruction?

A small bowel obstruction is a blockage in the small intestine that prevents gas, fluids, or solids from moving through them normally. Many different problems can cause a bowel obstruction, such as:

- Scar tissue from previous surgeries (adhesions)
- Hernias
- Tumors
- Twisting of the intestines (volvulus)
- Diverticulitis

An obstruction may also happen if the intestine stops moving. This sometimes occurs from inflammation, infection, or after abdominal surgery.

What are the symptoms of a small bowel obstruction?

Symptoms of a small bowel obstruction may include one or more of the following:

- Cramping abdominal pain. The pain may affect all or part of the abdominal area and may be severe.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- An inability to have a bowel movement or pass gas.
- Bloating
- Distended abdomen
- Fever

How is a small bowel obstruction diagnosed?

Your doctor will take a detailed health history to determine a past history of bowel obstructions, surgeries, or hernias. A physical exam will also be done, which will include listening for bowel sounds in the abdomen with a stethoscope. Your doctor may also order diagnostic tests, which may include:

- X-rays of the abdomen
- Upper GI and small bowel series
- Barium enema
- Abdominal CT scan
- Abdominal ultrasound
- Blood tests

How is a small bowel obstruction treated?

Treatment depends upon your individual needs and the cause of the small bowel obstruction.

Treatment may begin with supportive care in the hospital. This type of care focuses on close monitoring and maintaining comfort while waiting to see whether the blockage goes away on its own. You usually are not allowed to eat or drink. Fluids usually are given intravenously to prevent dehydration. A nasogastric (NG) tube may be placed in the nose and down into the stomach to remove fluids and gas; this may relieve pain and pressure.

Depending upon the cause, surgery may be required to relieve the obstruction.

Where can I get more information?

Speak with your doctor or nurse for more information on small bowel obstructions. You may also get more information from:

- Yale New Haven Health at <http://yalenewhavenhealth.org>
- National Library of Medicine/MedlinePlus at www.nlm.nih.gov

Sources: Hampton & Bryant. (1992). Ostomies and continent diversions: Nursing Management. St. Louis, Missouri: Mosby.
National Library of Medicine/MedlinePlus @ www.nlm.nih.gov Retrieved January 2006.
Yale New Haven Health @ yalenewhavenhealth.org Retrieved January 2006.

For more Patient Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and Click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education