



# Clinical Digest

ONLINE EDITION

## WOMEN'S HEALTH

### Severe Constipation Could Warn of Cardiovascular Risk

Asking your postmenopausal patients about constipation could help lower their cardiovascular (CV) risk significantly, according to a study by researchers from the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Researchers analyzed data from 73,047 women in the Women's Health Initiative. They found that women with moderate and severe constipation had more CV events (14 and 19 per 1,000 person-years, respectively) than women with no constipation (9.6 per 1,000 person-years).

After adjusting for race/ethnicity, age at screening, high cholesterol, diabetes, dietary factors, medications, frailty, depression, and other variables, the researchers found that only severe constipation remained associated with higher CV risk. This risk was mea-

sured at 23%.

The information about constipation was collected at baseline via a self-administered questionnaire. Constipation, defined as "difficulty having bowel movements" over the previous 4 weeks, was rated using a scale ranging from none to mild (symptom did not interfere with usual activities), moderate (symptom interfered somewhat with usual activities), or severe (symptom was so bothersome that usual activities could not be performed).

Women reporting constipation tended to be older, of African American or Hispanic descent, less educated, and more frail. They also more frequently reported 1 or more risk factors for CV disease: diabetes, obesity, hypertension, smoking, cholesterol-lowering drug use, low levels of physical activity, or family history of myocardial infarction. More of them took calcium channel blockers or diuretics, and they were more likely to have a personal history of depression.

The researchers did not find an independent or a causal association between constipation and CV disease. However, they comment that the link between constipation and increased incidence of CV events wasn't surprising, because women with more severe self-reported constipation also had a higher prevalence of all major CV risk factors at baseline.

However, their "purely speculative" explanation is that severe constipation might trigger an inflammatory process that, in turn, accelerates the development of atherosclerosis and CV events. Excessive or abnormal bacterial proliferation could cause inflammation, suggest the researchers. Bacterial overgrowth with movement of gut bacteria from the lumen across the intestinal mucosa and immune activation has been reported in patients with irritable bowel syndrome. They add that there is preliminary evidence of an association between infections and coronary heart disease. ●

Source: *Am J Med.* 2011;124(8):714-723.  
doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2011.03.026.