

United Ostomy Associations of America (UOAA) Supports Colostomy Irrigation in the United States

Background

United Ostomy Associations of America (UOAA) is a national 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that supports, empowers, and advocates for the 725,000 to 1,000,000 people living with an ostomy or continent diversion in the United States as well as the approximate 100,000 new patients facing ostomy surgery annually¹.

People living with a colostomy have undergone surgery to remove a part of their colon due to a disease process or trauma. They have a surgically-created opening (stoma) on their abdomen for the elimination of waste and a 'pouching prosthetic² system' is continuously worn over the stoma to collect the waste, sometimes for the rest of their life.

Colostomy irrigation is a self care practice for those who have a colostomy and meet appropriate criteria. The process involves the instillation of water into the stoma, which encourages bowel evacuation and promotes regularity³. Historically, colostomy irrigation has been used since the mid-20th century and allows individuals with a colostomy to control their output more predictably, facilitating greater freedom in daily activities and lifestyle choices. As awareness and advocacy for the management of ostomies grow, colostomy irrigation deserves renewed attention as a beneficial option for many colostomy patients' post-surgery.

Potential Benefits on Patients' Lives

The integration of colostomy irrigation into patient care can significantly impact the lives of individuals with a descending or sigmoid colostomy who meet the physical, environmental (i.e., potable water and adequate bathroom facilities) and psychological needs of patients:

- **Enhanced Quality of Life:** By providing increased control over bowel movements, patients may experience less anxiety about potential incontinence and enjoy enhanced freedom to engage in social and physical activities³.
- **Improved Quality of Life:** For those with difficult stomas (e.g., flush, retracted, difficult pouching issues) leading to leakage and skin breakdown.
- **Predictable Bowel Routine:** Regular bowel movements through irrigation can help patients plan their daily activities, reducing unpredictability and improving overall satisfaction with their ostomy management.
- **Reduced Healthcare Costs:** Effective management through irrigation may lead to reduced use of traditional ostomy pouches thereby decreasing the overall costs associated with ostomy care³.
- **Psychosocial Benefits:** Improved emotional well-being is often reported by individuals who feel empowered to manage their condition more effectively.

From the patient perspective:

"I have lived with and irrigated my colostomy for 20 years. I think that it is VITAL for all colostomates, who meet the physical criteria for irrigation, to be educated about the irrigation management CHOICE. For me, irrigation is what makes my colostomy livable. The benefits of irrigation far outweigh the time commitment and procedure of irrigating. Everyone's fecal output and tolerance of no sphincter living is unique as well as personal views on hygiene and what works for their bodies. To make a choice you need to be aware of what is available." - Sue M.

"After my surgery, I was left with a colostomy and a urostomy. My goal during year 2 after the surgery was to somehow make the process of taking care of myself easier and less time-consuming. That's when I heard about irrigation. I became convinced that irrigation would greatly reduce the amount of time needed to care for my colostomy, but I didn't have the confidence to teach the process to myself. I found an ostomy specialist who taught me irrigation virtually! Not to sound too dramatic, but irrigation changed my life. I irrigate every other day, reducing the amount of time that I care for my colostomy and eliminating many of my prior food sensitivities. Irrigation promotes the feeling of cleanliness and, most importantly, makes me a happy ostomate!" - Sharon D.

"Irrigation allows me to control my life. Eases travel and social life in that I do not have to plan on emptying my pouch. An empty pouch sets me free." - James M.

"Irrigation gives me a good quality of life living with an ostomy. Not having to worry about output in between irrigations gives a feeling of cleanliness and decreases the chance of embarrassing gas sounds. Knowing I don't have a pouch of output hanging off of my body each day helps to gain confidence knowing I can wear anything and go anywhere feeling great." - Cheryl O.

Current Issues Concerning Colostomy Irrigation

Despite its potential benefits, colostomy irrigation is not widely taught or adopted among patients in the United States. The current issues surrounding this practice include:

- **Limited Awareness:** Many healthcare professionals have limited familiarity with colostomy irrigation, resulting in inadequate education and recommendations about its availability and benefits to patients.
- **Access to Resources:** Specialized training programs and comprehensive information about irrigation practices are not easily accessible to all patients or healthcare professionals
- **Variability in Clinical Practice Guidelines and Inconsistent Recommendations:** There is a lack of standardized guidelines and/or protocols regarding the initiation and maintenance of irrigation practices, leading to confusion among healthcare professionals and patients about the efficacy and safety of irrigation and discrepancies in patient care across different medical facilities.
- **Cultural and Psychological Barriers:** Some patients may experience embarrassment or psychological barriers when discussing bowel management techniques, which may deter them from exploring irrigation as an option.
- **Barriers to Education:** 1) Lack of training for healthcare professionals - Many nurse clinicians and certified ostomy care specialists receive limited education on colostomy irrigation techniques during their training, leading to insufficient knowledge when advising patients; 2) Time constraints - Healthcare professionals often operate under tight schedules, which can hinder thorough discussions about colostomy management options, including irrigation.
- **Insurance Coverage:** Although most health plans, including Medicare, cover irrigation supplies, questions around insurance reimbursement can deter healthcare professionals from recommending it as a viable option for their patients.

Support from UOAA

UOAA is committed to supporting individuals with ostomies, advocating for better care and resources for patients, and fostering a community of support. UOAA provides comprehensive educational materials and resources, highlighting the importance of colostomy irrigation. Their efforts include:

- **Advocacy for Training:** UOAA actively promotes the inclusion of irrigation education in nursing and medical curricula, empowering healthcare professionals to offer accurate information to patients.
- **Resources for Patients:** UOAA provides patients with access to a forum dedicated to irrigation on its online discussion board, educational content focused on ostomy management techniques, including colostomy irrigation and Affiliated Support Groups across the United States where irrigation may be discussed.
- **Conferences and Webinars:** Through organized events, UOAA connects patients with certified ostomy care specialists, fostering an environment where irrigation practices can be discussed and demonstrated.
- **Research and Evidence-Based Guidelines:** UOAA encourages and supports research aimed at providing clear evidence of the benefits of colostomy irrigation, helping to standardize its practice across healthcare settings.

Call To Action

UOAA believes knowledge is power. We invite healthcare professionals to collaborate in enhancing colostomy care. UOAA encourages surgeons to promote utilization of irrigation with their colostomy patients. Additionally, UOAA encourages nurse clinicians to enroll in comprehensive courses including colostomy irrigation techniques. Gain the skills to support your patients effectively, improving their outcomes and fostering their confidence and independence. By educating your patients about the benefits and techniques of colostomy irrigation, they can be empowered to improve their quality of life through informed self-management.

Conclusion

The promotion of colostomy irrigation within the United States is essential for improving the quality of life for individuals with a colostomy. By addressing current issues, utilizing support from organizations like UOAA, and advocating for education and training, we can facilitate broader acceptance and implementation of this beneficial practice. Empowering patients through knowledge and resources will lead to a greater sense of control, improved health outcomes, and enriched lives for individuals living with a colostomy.

References

¹Ostomy 101 - Provided by United Ostomy Associations of America. (2017). Retrieved August 17, 2020, from

https://www.ostomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ostomy_infographic_20170812.pdf

²Title XVIII, §1861 (s)(8) of the Social Security Act defines prosthetics as those, which replace all or part of an internal body organ, including colostomy bags and supplies directly related to colostomy care, and replacement of such devices.

³Marinova R, Marinova P. Colostomy irrigation: implementing structured protocol-led follow-up. Br J Nurs. 2024 Sep 5;33(16):S30-S35. doi: 10.12968/bjon.2024.0058. PMID: 39250451.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39250451/>

Disclaimer for People Living with a Colostomy:

This document contains information developed by United Ostomy Associations of America. This information does not replace medical advice from your healthcare professional. You are a unique individual and your experiences may differ from that of other patients. Talk to your healthcare professional, if you have any questions about this document, your condition, or your treatment plan.

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