

Improving Your Irrigation Technique

Introduction

Are you getting the longest possible interval between irrigations, and does your stoma stay completely clean in between? Irrigation is not just a matter of stuffing some water in, and letting some rubbish come out. The questions of how much water to use for best results, and how often to perform the procedure, are closely related. It is necessary also to be certain that the water used is actually going into the colon, and not leaking away.

It is desirable to be quite clear about the aim of the irrigation process: to leave a length of the colon empty so that it can replace the function of the rectum in storing faeces until they are eliminated. If water is introduced into a colon which is filled with faeces right up to the stoma, the water will penetrate a considerable distance into the colon, and virtually all the faeces which have been surrounded by water will be eliminated. If on the other hand, there is space in the colon which is not occupied by faeces, the water will fill this space before it penetrates alongside the faeces, and the water in the free space will simply be discharged without having any useful effect. The difficulty is to judge how much water to use, and how often to use it.

Getting the Water In

Many failures in irrigation are due to the water never reaching the colon, but if you are using a suspended reservoir there is a simple check on this: when all the water has run out of the reservoir, where is the water level in the tube? If it is at around nipple height, that is excellent, because it represents the intra-abdominal pressure - the pressure inside your abdomen. If the water level drops to stoma level, then you have a leak, so you cannot be certain how much water has actually entered the colon. Users of the Braun Irrimatic pump do not have the benefit of this simple check, and need to be alert all the time to the possibility of a leak. One way to monitor the situation is to ensure that there is a slight loop in the irrigation sleeve - a "U-bend" - and observe whether any water is collecting in it. It should be borne in mind that the pressure when using a pump is considerably higher than the pressure when using a suspended reservoir, so the possibility of a leak is that much greater. It will be found necessary to push the cone in almost up to the flange to guarantee a seal, and to align it correctly. This is most easily achieved by putting the middle two fingers of the left hand into the cone, one each side of the tube, rather like a glove puppet.

Having ensured that the intended quantity of water is getting into the colon, the fundamental question is how much water to use, and how often to perform the irrigation.

Deciding on a Course of Action

There is of course the additional factor of the sort of food you eat, and how much you eat (see subsequent section: "The Importance of Diet"). For this reason, no hard and fast rules can be offered, only suggestions as to how you can determine the optimum details for your own body. There are two indications which can help. Firstly, is there any output from your stoma in between irrigations? If the stoma cap almost always is as clean when you take it off as it was when you put it on, then you can't be going too far wrong. If however, there is frequently some output from the stoma in between irrigations, then improvement is probably possible. Secondly, when you are irrigating, how much water comes out when you remove the cone, before any faeces emerge? If there is a substantial gush of almost clean water, then it suggests there is spare space in the colon, and you have irrigated sooner than you need.

The longest period with no stoma output will be achieved when you are irrigating at the right time, with the right amount of water. Bear in mind that really effective irrigation may take time; as you will see later, I aim for maximum time between irrigations, and I try to allow a total of about two hours, or more

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if I am not convinced that the discharge has finished, before I remove the irrigation sleeve and fit a stoma cap, but one doesn't have to sit in the toilet all that time. If you are at home, allow around twenty minutes for the initial discharge to take place, then just loop the irrigation sleeve up, under your clothing, and continue with your normal routine until you are satisfied that the process has completed. The last part of a good irrigation is likely to be fairly liquid, and will be very slightly bubbly, because it is still fermenting. This, of course, illustrates another benefit: less material fermenting in the colon, and consequently less wind!

How Much Water?

As a rough guide, each 600ml of water is worth a day in between irrigations. If you aren't staying completely "clean" in between irrigations, experiment with the quantity of water you are using. If water gushes out before faeces, then try reducing the quantity, 100ml (0.1litre) at a time; conversely, if faeces emerge almost immediately, then try increasing the quantity, again, 100ml at a time, until you have no stoma output in between irrigations. Whenever you change the quantity, use that same amount for not less than three successive irrigations, to ensure that it is representative of long term performance. Another way in which you can establish the optimum water quantity is to omit an irrigation, wait until you have established a normal faecal output, then irrigate with (say) 1.2 litres of water, and see how long that gives you with no stoma output. If it just takes you comfortably past two days, then you are not far wrong; if it takes you well past, or falls short, then some adjustment will probably be desirable, as suggested above. It should be noted that any change to one's eating routine, such as a party, or a substantial dinner at an abnormal time, can cause a minor upset in stoma behaviour, and should be disregarded.

This is not to suggest that everyone needs to aim for the longest possible interval between irrigations. The total time for each irrigation is likely to be longer if you are aiming for a three day interval than for a two day, and for a two day interval the total time required is likely to be longer than for one day. If your routine is better suited to spending a shorter time each day, and irrigating daily, then by all means do so. Others may prefer to aim for the longer interval, and know, for example, that they can spend a weekend away without being concerned with irrigation.

My Own Example

By way of illustration, I had been using 1.6 litres, and was achieving a slightly unreliable two days between irrigations. I had observed a considerable quantity of water gushing out each time, so I delayed my next irrigation until faeces had been emerging for some hours, then irrigated with my usual 1.6 litres, and waited. I was able to achieve three days with no stoma output at all, and I have since been doing so regularly, although following the principles described in this document, I have increased the amount to 1¾ litres to improve the reliability. Notice that even on a two day irrigation frequency 1.6 litres was not completely satisfactory, demonstrating that in irrigation more is not necessarily better. Any adult who has had an APR, and whose colon is healthy, has enough colon to be able to use 1½ or even 2 litres per irrigation, so if you feel confident about it, give it a try. If you have had a colostomy for any other reason, it would be advisable to take medical advice about how much colon you have, and the quantity of water which you can use.

I doubt whether anyone who has not enjoyed a consistent three day irrigation frequency can understand the extent of the freedom which it brings. It brings its own problems too: remembering which day to irrigate! I take an Actimel occasionally, having started doing so after an oral antibiotic destroyed my intestinal bacteria - and, incidentally, ruined my irrigation performance. Under normal circumstances it is probably unnecessary, but I now take one every irrigation day, and since I

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extended my irrigation period to three days, I remember the days by writing the appropriate date on the cap of each pot. I only have to look in the fridge to remind myself on which day I should be irrigating.

The Importance of Diet

If one considers the irrigation process as being simply a way to provide storage space for faeces until they are discharged, then it will be evident by simple arithmetic that the number of days between irrigations (n) will equal storage space provided (S) divided by quantity of faeces generated each day (Q), or for the algebra enthusiasts, $n = S / Q$. In attempting to make recommendations, it is necessary to remember that Q is highly dependent on diet, and much more variable than most people would ever imagine.

I recently had the opportunity to explore this for myself when I had a friend staying for a month who could not be described either as a vegetarian or a fruitarian, but consumed minimal amounts of meat, fish and cereals, and whose diet consisted very largely of salad vegetables and fruit. I tried this diet for myself, and discovered that one has to consume quite large quantities in order to feel full, with the perhaps unsurprising consequence that after a few days my irrigation was completely ineffective, and the output from my stoma continued almost unabated from one irrigation to the next. I was prepared to find that my normal 1¾ litre irrigation “bought” me somewhat less than three days without significant output, but I did not expect to find that there was never a single clear day.

The next surprise came when my friend returned home, and I reverted to my normal diet. I have previously stressed the importance of testing any change of irrigation technique at least three times before attempting to draw a conclusion, but I did not expect to discover that in my case it was not until the fourth irrigation (almost two weeks) that any useful change occurred, and that it took a whole month before my normal irrigation performance was restored.

This is perhaps an appropriate opportunity to offer a reminder that adequate hydration is essential if successful irrigation is to be achieved. Typically, when on holiday in a hot country, people do not increase their water intake appropriately; the stoma responds by discharging pellets of faeces, reminiscent of rabbit droppings, and this is likely to happen no matter how carefully you irrigate. If you encounter this problem, remember your 2 litres a day recommended water intake, and also the fact that by the time you feel thirsty you are already partially dehydrated. Don't be too enthusiastic about ice cubes: water at room temperature leaves the stomach and gets into the system more quickly than cold water. If you find unchilled water less palatable, try adding a little lemon juice: PLJ in England, and Pulco Citron Vert in France, for example. If you wake up thirsty in the night, drink half a glass, not just a sip: six to eight gulps if, like me, you don't want to turn the light on.

Conclusions

All the foregoing may at first sight appear complicated, but it is another way of saying what a very wise consultant once said to me: “Listen to your body, it can tell you more than I ever can.” To those who aren't irrigating, I would say “Have a go: you can't imagine the freedom until you've experienced it.” Start with about a litre, and see how you get on. The group who are likely to benefit most from irrigation are young colostomates, who can then enjoy games and sport exactly like everyone else. Take advice as to whether there are any contra-indications, and provided there are not, I would suggest that primary school children who wish to do so try using half a litre initially, and experiment from there; secondary school children can think more in terms of the adult recommendations, depending on their age, but could perhaps start with 800ml.

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To sum up:

- The irrigation performance that you can achieve is dependent on your diet, how much colon you still have, your fitness, and the amount of exercise you take. No-one can predict accurately what is possible for you, and you will have to experiment for yourself.
- If you are starting irrigation, try using a litre of water and irrigating every two days. Do this at least three times before attempting to draw any conclusions.
- If you are seeking to increase the time during which there is no output from the stoma, or the time between irrigations, increase the quantity of water by 100ml at a time, but use the same quantity at least three times before changing again.
- Make sure that the water you are using is actually entering the stoma. Many irrigation disappointments are due to water leaking away.
- Decide what you want to achieve; irrigation every three days is going to take longer to complete than an irrigation every two days, which in turn will take longer than a daily irrigation.
- If you need to be out promptly every morning, consider irrigating in the evening, but preferably do not keep changing between morning and evening irrigations.

Enjoy your freedom!

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