Definitions, Attitudes, and Management Practices in Relation to Diarrhea During Enteral Nutrition: A Survey of Patients, Nurses, and Dietitians

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Background: Diarrhea is a common complication in patients receiving enteral nutrition (EN), and understanding this problem among patients and healthcare professionals is required. The aim of the study was to investigate patients', nurses', and dietitians' definitions of diarrhea during EN, the attitudes of nurses and patients toward it, and the management practices of nurses and dietitians in response to diarrhea during EN.

Methods: Twenty-two patients receiving EN, 57 nurses, and 33 dietitians were recruited and interviewed in a cross-sectional study, using a questionnaire that had been developed following an extensive literature review and pretested for clarity. Results: The ratings assigned by the 3 groups differed significantly for all the characteristics used to define diarrhea: frequency ($P = .006$), quantity ($P < .001$), consistency ($P = .003$), color ($P < .001$), odor ($P < .001$), and incontinence ($P < .001$). Patients gave incontinence the highest rank when defining diarrhea, whereas the healthcare professionals gave fecal consistency and frequency the highest ranks. Patients and nurses rated the unpleasantness of each characteristic of diarrhea during EN differently, with patients rating incontinence and fecal frequency and nurses rating odor and changing the patients' underwear as the most unpleasant characteristics. Nurses and dietitians differed in the frequency with which they adopted various strategies to manage patients who developed diarrhea during EN. Conclusions: Patients have different definitions and attitudes toward diarrhea during EN from those of nurses and dietitians. Patients' perceptions need to be understood and respected by healthcare professionals to improve patient-centered care. (Nur Clin Pract. XXX:XX:000-000)

Keywords: enteral nutrition, diarrhea, definitions, attitudes, practices

Diarrhea is a common complication associated with enteral nutrition (EN), occurring in 2%-95% of patients.\textsuperscript{1} It is associated with a range of negative clinical sequelae, including fluid and electrolyte abnormalities, fecal incontinence, and pressure sores. In addition, diarrhea may result in the cessation of EN, which itself may exacerbate undernutrition\textsuperscript{2} and its associated consequences. Despite the potential for diarrhea to affect the success of EN, little is known of how health professionals and patients define diarrhea during EN, their attitudes toward it, and how health professionals manage this important complication.

There is no standard definition of diarrhea during EN, with 33 unique definitions used in the literature.\textsuperscript{3} Several different descriptors have been used, including fecal frequency (e.g., >3 or >4 stools/d), weight (e.g., >200 g/d), consistency, or combinations of the descriptors (e.g., >2 liquid stools/d and >200 g liquid stool/d).\textsuperscript{4} In clinical practice, health professionals (nurses, dietitians, and gastroenterologists) do not agree on the importance of the characteristics used to define it (e.g., fecal consistency, frequency).\textsuperscript{4} One study has shown that there is large variability in how diarrhea is defined by the general public.\textsuperscript{5} However, there is currently no research regarding the definitions of diarrhea used by patients receiving EN.