

One year since the death of Lisa Marie Presley
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The year 2023 started with heartbreak for many fans of Lisa Marie Presley, the only child of the late singer Elvis Presley.

The Los Angeles County Medical Examiner says autopsy results showed Presley died from a small bowel obstruction on January 12, 2023.

One year later, the importance of monitoring for any signs and symptoms remains crucial, especially when you've had surgery involving your abdomen.

What is small bowel obstruction?

Raman Kumar, MD, a colorectal surgeon with OSF HealthCare, works with patients dealing with small bowel obstruction fairly often. He says a garden hose is a good visualization of the condition.

"Pretend you're watering the garden and all of a sudden, the water is either slow or completely blocked. You can have a complete obstruction or a partial obstruction," Dr. Kumar says. "Partial obstruction is where only part of the water is getting out of the garden hose. Complete obstruction is when you have a complete twist or kink, and nothing comes out."

The digestive system is all connected

Dr. Kumar refers to the entire digestive system, from your mouth to your anus, as one large tube.

"Different parts of the tube do different things," Dr. Kumar says. "The small intestine is the part that usually absorbs a lot of nutrients and determines what it is you ate. It absorbs minerals, vitamins, carbohydrates, proteins and fats. Whatever it does not want to absorb, it gets put into the large colon which is the part that absorbs the water and makes the poop."

What are the main causes of small bowel obstruction?

1: Adhesions or scar tissue from prior surgery

"Any time you have surgery done; you form scar tissue between the different loops of the small bowel. The majority of the time, the nasogastric (NG) tube and doing a contrast study will unkink them. Sometimes you have to go in there and cut out the scar tissue, but when you cut out more scar tissue, you create more scar tissue," Dr. Kumar says.

2: Hernias (inguinal, umbilical, ventral, incisional)

"Reducing the hernia will solve the obstruction, then we can fix the hernia in the end," Dr. Kumar says.

3: Cancer (colon, small bowel, metastatic cancer)

"In this case, we will have to go to the operating room," Dr. Kumar adds.

“Any surgery that involves the abdominal cavity can cause scar tissue. Hysterectomy, C-Section, hernia repair, appendectomy, cholecystectomy, bowel surgery, tubal ligation, kidney surgery and bariatric surgery,” Dr. Kumar says. “And also, radiation to the pelvis can cause adhesions, like for cervical cancer, etc.”

Presley’s autopsy noted she had bariatric surgery, or gastric bypass surgery. But it said it was “not related to the immediate cause of death.” Additionally, the 54-year-old was complaining of abdominal pain the morning of the day she died.

Signs and symptoms of small bowel obstruction

“If you go back to the garden hose, no water is coming through, so all the water is going to back up. In a human, that means nausea, vomiting, you’re not able to pass any gas or have a bowel movement. You’ll feel like you’re pregnant, your abdomen bloats up, and you’re going to be in a lot of pain,” Dr. Kumar says.

Dr. Kumar adds that getting treatment as soon as possible is extremely important.

“If a complete obstruction is there for a couple hours, you have the potential that your bowel is going to die,” Dr. Kumar says. “If you have a partial obstruction, we put an NG tube down from your nose to your stomach, give you intravenous (IV) fluids, don’t let you have anything to drink or eat. We take some X-Rays and see if the obstruction takes care of itself.”

How to prevent small bowel obstruction

“If you’ve had surgery in the past, or even have had a small bowel obstruction, the one main thing I would say is to make sure you chew your food properly and take small bites,” Dr. Kumar says. “If you take a big bite of a steak, that’s going to plug up your intestines. If you have a lot of food like asparagus or celery that are very fibrous and don’t completely digest, that can also cause a small bowel obstruction. I’m not saying not to have it, I’m saying to have it in moderation.”

Dr. Kumar adds a few more tips to prevent small bowel obstructions.

- Don’t smoke
- Exercise
- Eat well
- Drink well by avoiding sugary drinks and alcohol