

FACTSHEET



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Constipation

Constipation is a common problem in childhood. It is rarely due to an underlying medical cause. Your doctor will be able to tell you if your child needs any medical tests.

This fact sheet is for toddlers and children with constipation and does not apply for babies (under 1 year of age).

What is constipation?

There is a wide variation in how often healthy children and adults will pass stools (poo). Some children pass a stool (go to the toilet) three or four times a day, and others may go twice a week without any problems. There is an even bigger variation in babies. "Constipation" is when stools are hard, painful or difficult to pass.

How do I know if it's a problem?

Your child may be constipated if he or she:

Says it hurts to pass a stool

Children (and adults) avoid things that cause pain. If it is painful to pass a stool, children may avoid going to the toilet and "hold on". This makes the stool dry, and it is harder and more difficult to pass. It is normal to have slight discomfort before needing to pass a stool but it is not normal if your child is in a lot of pain. Talk to your doctor about this.

Passes stool in their pants without meaning to (soiling)

Children who are constipated can have runny stools that they can't control. This is due to "overflow" of liquid stool around the hard, older stool that is stuck there. If your child soils their underwear often, talk to

your doctor about this. Your doctor may prescribe medication. Treatment of soiling usually involves both medication and behaviour changes. Treatment often takes a long time.

What causes constipation?

It is not always clear why children become constipated. Causes may include:

Holding onto stools

- Children may put off going to the toilet if it is painful or if they are too busy and distracted e.g. if they are playing.
- Children might avoid using toilets at preschool/school if they are unfamiliar, smelly, or if they don't want to be teased.
- Holding on can cause the stool to build up in the bowel and it can become hard.

Illnesses where your child eats and drinks less

- If your child has a viral illness, they may eat and drink less than normal. This can cause constipation because less food/drink is being consumed. Children can also get constipated after having gastroenteritis due to poor fluid intake.

Not enough fibre from food

- Fibre helps our bowels to work regularly so it is important that children get enough. See "Ways to include fibre" for some suggestions on how to make fibre part of your child's diet.
- It is also important that your child doesn't have too much fibre as it can make constipation worse, especially for a child who is not drinking enough fluid.

Not enough fluid

- Your bowels need fibre and fluid to work together, to keep them moving regularly.

Some underlying medical conditions can contribute to constipation. However, these are uncommon in children. Discuss this with your doctor if any further tests are required.

What to do

It is important for your child to pass any hard stool that is stuck in the lower bowel. The lower bowel can often be overstretched and not working properly. Any hard stool that may be stuck needs to be passed to clear the bowel and let it recover. The stools then need to be kept soft, often for a long time, to allow the overstretched bowel to return to its normal size again. This will also help the stools to be passed without pain. While having enough fibre is important, the best way to treat constipation is with medication and behavioural techniques.

There are different ways to treat constipation:

Healthy eating and drinking habits:

- Drinking enough fluid: School age children need to drink 4-6 cups per day, and possibly more in hot weather. Water is the best drink for your child. Small amounts of diluted juice or sugar free cordial can be used. Pear juice and prune juice contain natural stool softeners.
- Including fibre in the diet: This can be done by eating fruit and vegetables, beans and legumes (e.g. lentils) as well as choosing wholegrain breads, cereals & crackers.
- Getting plenty of exercise.

Correcting toilet behaviour

- Encourage your child to go to the toilet regularly. A good time is after meals, because your body has a natural reflex to stimulate the bowels.
- Teach your child to go to the toilet when they feel the urge/need to go, and not to hold on.
- Have a high enough foot stool under your child's feet (aim to have their knees higher than their hips) when they are sitting on the toilet. This can help stool to pass more easily.
- It is important to encourage your child, and not to criticise or punish them.

Medications

If your child needs medication to help them pass stools, your doctor will advise you about: *which* medication to use, *how much* to use, and *how long* to use it for. Some

medications that can be used in adults are not generally used in children. It is important to follow their instructions carefully. Your child needs to drink plenty of water when using these medications.

How to prevent further problems

To prevent constipation, encourage your child to go to the toilet regularly - at least once a day – after meal times is a good time. Teach them to go to the toilet when they feel the urge/need to go (and not to hold on!). It is very important that a child is encouraged in correct toileting behaviour and not criticised or punished. Having enough fibre is a good lifelong habit for everybody. Increasing the fibre and having extra drinks will not usually treat constipation – but these can be important to prevent it coming back after things have improved with the above treatments.

Ways to include fibre in your child's diet:

- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables.
- Use wholegrain breads and cereals.
- Include nuts: **NOTE:** we recommend using ground nuts, rather than whole nuts, in children under 5 years due to choking risk.

Remember:

- The treatment of constipation takes time and patience. Constipation can, and often does, come back again.
- Fibre, fluid and regular exercise can all help to keep the bowel working regularly.
- Remind your child to avoid holding on to their stools. Encourage them to sit on the toilet after at least one meal a day.
- Always use any medications for constipation as directed by your doctor.

Useful Resources

- "Beating Sneaky Poo": see www.narrativetherapylibrary.com/beating-sneaky-poo-ideas-for-faecal-soiling-1.html