

Constipation in children

How do you know if your child is constipated?

The main symptom of constipation is hard poo. How often your child has a poo is not as important as whether it passes easily. There's a big range of normal when it comes to how often children do a poo. Some kids go 2-3 times a day, and other children go twice a week. Your child is not constipated if the poos are soft and pass easily.

If your child is constipated, there might be pain and discomfort when doing a poo, which might lead to avoiding using the toilet. The hard poo might overstretch the skin around the anus and cause small, superficial tears, which might lead to pain and bleeding. Your child might seem generally crankier than normal and have tummy pains that come and go. You might see 'holding-on' behaviour such as squatting, crossing legs or refusing to sit on the toilet.

If your child has been constipated for a long time, the hard poo gets stuck and stretches the rectum. Your child might then lose the urge to go the toilet and the liquid poo might then overflow around the old hard poo, without your child feeling it so they can poo their pants without knowing.

Causes

Constipation in toilet-trained children can be a result of holding poos in. This can occur for many reasons including being too busy playing; because it hurts to go to the toilet; or the toilets at preschool or school aren't pleasant to use.

Constipation might also happen with insufficient fluid or fibre intake, or as a result of an illness where your child eats and drinks less. Other causes include changes in diet, such as when a child starts eating more adult foods; drinking too much cow's milk; changes in routine such as travelling or starting school; many medicines can also cause constipation

Chronic constipation usually requires several months to overcome. Don't be discouraged if the problem comes back during these months. The rectum is made of muscle tissue; when a child has had chronic constipation, the muscle becomes stretched. It may take several months to get the muscle back into shape.

There are some underlying medical conditions that might cause constipation in children, but these are uncommon.

Long term Prevention

First and foremost, your child needs healthy bowel habits through diet and behaviour.

You can first build these habits through diet. A healthy diet that contains adequate fibre and lots of fluids (especially water). This helps to both treat and prevent constipation. If your child's urine is darker than straw coloured then you need to increase fluids. Foods that are high in fibre include wholegrain breads and cereals, fruit and vegetables. Make sure your child is not eating or drinking too many servings of dairy products. Some alternative sources to dairy for calcium include tinned fish with bones, seaweed, parsley, broccoli, spinach, almonds, brazil nuts and egg yolk.

If your child tends to be constipated, encourage the habit of sitting on the toilet regularly and pushing, three times a day for 3-5 minutes each time (usually after meals). Also teach your child to respond to the urge to poo by going to the toilet. Try to provide a good foot support while on the toilet. This will help flex your child's hips and place the pelvis in a more normal "squatting" position for having a bowel movement. Make sure your child gets plenty of exercise throughout the day. Set a good example for your child by following healthy routines of eating, exercising, and going to the toilet.

Short term treatment

To relieve the constipation, you can encourage a bowel movement by trying the following:

1. Fresh apple, pear or prune juice.
These are mild natural laxatives that work in some children.
2. Gently massaging your child's belly may help relieve discomfort.
You can also have your child lie on his or her back, legs flexed onto his or her belly, and rotate his or her legs in a clockwise direction.
3. A warm bath in the tub.
This may help relax the muscles that normally keep stool inside the rectum and help pass the stool.

If these methods don't work then, in consultation with a professional, you can try

1. Glycerin suppositories
Use 1 or 2 glycerin suppositories to lubricate the stool, making it easier to pass. Only do this once or twice. It should not be a regular treatment.
2. Movicol or Senekot
Movicol increases the water in the poo and softens it while Senekot stimulates the bowel to remove the poo. Again this should not be a regular treatment.

Partly based on information from "Raising Children Network (the Australian parenting website)"

<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>