

So what is common constipation?

Constipation is when a person has difficulty passing a hard bowel motion (poo), causing pain and discomfort. A healthy diet, having enough to drink, exercise, correct toilet training and regular toilet habits are important to prevent and help treat constipation in children. Treatment for infant constipation requires expert medical advice. *Definition of Constipation:* Many different definitions exist. Most include decreased stool frequency (less than three poos per week in a child four years old), associated with distress related to the passage of stools.

It's not how often that's important

Constipation is not just how often a child goes to the toilet. It also refers to how hard the poo is when it is passed. When a child is constipated, it hurts when they go to the toilet. They may also have tummy pain and bloating. Babies are constipated if their poo is dry and crumbly, or like pellets. Some children may use their bowels (poo) only one to two times a week, while others do so every day. If this is a child's normal pattern and they don't have any pain when they do a poo and it is not hard, there is no reason to be concerned. Constipation that goes on for a long time can cause other problems for children, such as soiling where softer poo leaks out around a solid lump of poo and dirties underpants.

Causes of constipation in children

Constipation is a common problem. The causes of a child's constipation may not always be clear, but may include:

- If a child is drinking too much milk and not getting enough solids, the lack of fibre can cause constipation
- A tear in the skin next to the anus (called an anal fissure), caused by doing a hard poo, will make the child try to hold on for longer because it may hurt to go to the toilet
- Some children ignore the urge to go to the toilet because they are too busy playing. Some children hold back when they are being toilet trained
- Some children don't want to use school or preschool toilets for various reasons, such as lack of privacy or a smelly toilet
- The child may not be getting enough exercise
- A small percentage of children may have an underlying medical problem

Signs of constipation in children

Some of the signs of constipation in children include:

- Saying that it hurts when doing a poo
- Showing signs of holding on - such as crossing legs, running around, crying or refusing to sit on the toilet
- Complaining of tummy pain
- Soiling their pants (with ongoing constipation)

Treating constipation in children

Suggestions for treating constipation in children include:

- Encourage children to exercise more.
- Establish a regular toilet routine. 'Bowel training' requires motivation and encouragement. Use a star chart system of rewards to help your child to go and sit on the toilet. This will help your child get used to doing a bowel movement at a similar time each day
- Discuss the school toilets with the teachers if this is a problem
- Limit the use of laxatives. They should not be used more than once or twice. They don't solve the underlying problem and may change the way the bowels work
- Try to solve the problem quickly - the longer your child remains constipated, the worse it may become and the longer it may take to treat
- See a doctor if constipation persists

Add fibre to the diet

A healthy diet is very important. Suggestions for improving your child's diet include; offer more wholegrain or whole meal breads, rice, cereals and biscuits with high fibre. Fibre intake should be increased slowly. Offer more fruits, dried fruits and vegetables. Encourage children to have lots of drinks (water is best)

Complications of chronic constipation

There are no health problems from occasional bouts of constipation. However, if the constipation lasts for a long time and a large mass of poo is held in the gut, soiling may begin. This can lead to serious social and emotional problems.

Things to remember

Constipation is the passing of a hard bowel motion (poo) with pain and discomfort. If your child has a bowel motion only once, or a couple of times per week, this is not constipation unless the poo is also hard. Common causes of constipation include lack of water and not enough soluble fibre in the diet. Constipation in babies needs special care.

Constipation is an important problem in children. Up to 1 in 10 children seek medical attention because of constipation. 3-5% of all paediatric outpatients and 25% of all paediatric gastroenterology clinic visits are for constipation. While most children with constipation do not have significant organic disease, it remains a serious problem, which impacts on quality of life and health care utilisation.

The following guidelines outline a practical approach to evaluation and management. Careful history and examination are usually sufficient for the assessment. Diagnostic tests are often not needed and are reserved for those who are seriously affected. Most critical, is education and support of patients and families as prolonged treatment is usually required to achieve resolution.

This document has been based on published guidelines, and extensively updated with reference to recent literature and local conditions. These guidelines include the evaluation, initial treatment; follow up management and indication for consultation by a specialist Paediatric Gastroenterologist in children with constipation. The key points are education of families and patients, reassurance, elimination of faecal impaction, close follow up and prolonged maintenance treatment. In particular prolonged maintenance treatment is essential for eventual success.

WHERE TO GET HELP:

Your local doctor

The Maternal and Child Health Line (24-hour service) Tel. 132 229

Community Dietitian

The Royal Children's Hospital Tel. (03) 9345 5522

Paediatric Continence Association 1300 885 209

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