

Health Facts

Emergency Department

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation is when a child does not go to the toilet regularly or has hard poos (faeces or bowel movements) that sometimes can be difficult or painful to pass. Bowel movements can vary even for healthy children.

- A breast fed baby might poo after every feed or only every 7-10 days.
- A bottle fed baby and older children will usually poo approximately every 2 days.

Signs and symptoms of constipation may include:

- Hard dry poos
- Irregular bowel movements
- Stomach pain- that comes and goes
- Bloating
- Not as hungry as normal
- Irritable behaviour
- Bleeding (a hard poo may split the skin at the anus/ back passage-causing bleeding and pain)
- Holding on to avoid doing a painful poo

Long term constipation may cause:

Poos in pants - if a child has poo in their bottom for a long time then they may lose the urge to go to the toilet. They may soil their pants without realising they needed to do a poo.

What causes constipation?

Natural tendency - some children naturally have slow gut movement

Bowel habits - sometimes children delay going to the toilet because they are busy playing or they may have had a previous hard and painful bowel movements; this can be frightening and may cause "holding on" behaviours

Change in toilet environment - such as a new school toilet or travel

Diet - not enough fibre from food. Fibre helps our bowels work properly and regularly

Fluid intake - children need to drink plenty of fluids (drinking lots of cows milk per day may also lead to constipation)

Illness - any illness where your child eats or drinks less

Medications- some medications can cause constipation

Health Facts

Treatment

It may take time for the bowel size and urge sensation to return to normal. Treatment may take a long time and should include:

Healthy bowel habits

Constipated children need to develop the habit of regularly sitting on the toilet.

- Consider placing child on the toilet for 3-5 minutes after each meal, even if they don't feel the urge to go.
- Provide a book, potty seat or foot stool for security.
- Reinforce good behaviours such as sitting on the toilet and/or pooing with encouragement or appropriate rewards.
- Encourage children not to ignore the urge to poo.

Remove frightening or painful associations

A child holding on to poo because it's painful will need to remain on laxatives to keep the poo soft for several weeks. This will promote healing of any splits in the skin around the bottom.

Attempt to find out if your child is afraid of using the school or kindergarten toilet.

Healthy diet

Provide your child with a diet that is high in fibre. Include: wholegrain breads and cereals; wholemeal pasta and brown rice; at least 2 serves of fruit every day; at least 3 serves of vegetables every day; reduce cows milk to 500mL per day; and avoid sweet drinks before meals to improve your child's appetite at mealtimes

Medications

Laxatives

Usually are helpful however if they don't work or you need to give repeated doses, then you should see your doctor. (Prune juice is a natural laxative and may taste better if mixed with another juice such as apple).

Suppositories

If laxatives are not successful within 2-3 days then you may need to use glycerine suppositories. Coat the suppository in a water soluble lubricant before inserting into your child's bottom. If you are required to use suppositories more than just occasionally then you should see your doctor.

Enemas

Never give a child an enema unless directed by your doctor. Mini enemas (eg. Microlax) are suitable for young children.

Health Facts

Bowel irrigation

A small number of children get so constipated that they need hospital admission to have their bowel cleaned out. This might be done by giving a fluid that the child can drink or passing it down a tube into the stomach (nasogastric tube).

References:

RCH-Kids health information. Constipation. April 2008.

<http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/factsheets>

WCHS-Factsheet-Constipation.December 2005.

<http://www.wchs.edu.au/parents/factsheets/pdf/constipation>

Produced by: Emergency © July 2005 CAHS 345 Rev 3, October 2013
Child and Adolescent Health Service
Princess Margaret Hospital for Children
Roberts Road, Subiaco WA 6008 Telephone: (08) 9340 8222

**This information is available in
alternative formats upon**

