Understanding childhood constipation

Advice for parents, carers and healthcare professionals
Introduction

Constipation is a common problem in childhood. It can develop for a number of reasons and not usually because there is anything physically wrong with your child.

Constipation can be distressing for both you and your child, and although it is natural to be concerned, it is not usually serious and does not mean that they will get bowel problems later in life. There are many effective treatment options available to make your child feel better, particularly if treated early.

Many children get temporary constipation that may last a few days and then gets better. This is quite normal and is nothing to worry about. However, if constipation persists and does not get better, you may find this leaflet a help.

This leaflet is designed to help you find out more about constipation in children, what may be causing it, what can be done to help cure it and most importantly, what can be done to help prevent it from coming back.

This leaflet is intended for information only. You should visit your doctor, health visitor or school nurse if you are at all concerned, if the constipation is persistent or causing distress to your child, or if your child is passing blood. You should not wait before seeking help, as the problem can get worse if you wait.
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What is constipation?

Constipation occurs when your child does not pass a bowel movement (stool) often enough. Then, when they do a poo it can hurt because the stools have become hard and dry. However, there are also some children who appear to be doing a poo every day, but they are not emptying their bowel properly and only passing small amounts of stool. These children can also be suffering from constipation.

**Definition of constipation (without soiling)**

- Infrequent passing of stools (less than 3 times per week) that are often small, hard and pellet-like
- Excessive straining
- Excessive stool hardness
- Pain on passing stools

Your child may need some help to restore natural bowel rhythms and prevent the constipation from coming back.
What is faecal impaction?

Definition of faecal impaction (with soiling)

When there is no adequate bowel movement for several days or weeks, a large compacted mass of faeces builds up in the rectum and/or colon which cannot be easily passed by the child.

Symptoms include failing to pass a stool for several days followed by a large, often painful or distressing bowel motion.

Between bowel movements, children with faecal impaction often soil their underclothes.
How common is constipation in children?

Many children get constipation from time to time for a variety of reasons and not usually because there is anything physically wrong with them.

In fact, up to 10% of children are thought to suffer from constipation at any one time.

- About one-third of 4 to 7 year olds are constipated at any one time.
- 5% of primary school children get constipation for more than 6 months.
- Chronic constipation is most common in children between the ages of 2 and 4 when they are potty training.
- In about 25% of cases, constipation starts when the child is still a baby.
How to tell if your child may be constipated

Some signs to look out for are:

- Fewer bowel movements than normal (less than 3 times per week)
- Pain and straining when passing stools
- Tummy ache
- Small, dry, hard stools
- Avoiding the toilet
- Not having an urge to do a poo
- Feeling that a bowel movement isn't finished
- Sore bottom
- Unpleasant smell
- Dribbling urine
- Leaking of liquid or loose stools

Constipation can be very uncomfortable for your child and they may complain of a tummy ache or say that doing a poo hurts.