

Constipation in Children

How do I know if my child is constipated?

Your child is constipated if 1 or more of the following are true:

- He or she has fewer than 3 bowel movements each week.
- The stools are hard, dry and unusually large.
- The stools are difficult to pass.

What causes constipation?

If your child doesn't drink enough water, milk or fruit juices, or if your child doesn't get a healthy diet or eat enough fiber, constipation may be the result. Fiber is found in foods such as cereals, grains, fruits and vegetables. If you give your child baby food for too long a time, or feed your child a diet high in meat, fatty foods or refined sugars (candy and desserts), your child will probably not be getting enough fiber.

Constipation may also begin when you change your baby from breast milk or baby formula to whole cow's milk.

If your small child often ignores the urge to have a bowel movement, he or she may become constipated. Children who are too busy playing or who are always rushing around may not find time to go to the bathroom. Some children don't like to use public bathrooms because of lack of privacy, dirty conditions or absence of toilet paper.

Sometimes constipation happens after your child has been sick or has taken certain medicines.

What can I do if my child is constipated?

There are 3 things you can do to help your child:

1. **Diet**--You can start by increasing the amount of fluid your child drinks every day. Also, give your baby a bottle of prune juice every day, or add corn syrup or brown sugar to your baby's formula. Ask your doctor how much to add. You can give an older child large quantities of fluids every day, as well as prune juice, bran cereal, fruits and vegetables that are high in fiber.
2. **Bowel habit training**--Your child should be taught not to wait to have a bowel movement. To establish a regular bowel habit, ask your child to sit on the toilet for at least 10 minutes at about the same time each day, preferably after a meal. Make sure your child can place his or her feet firmly on the floor while sitting on the toilet. If this is not possible, put a footstool in front of the toilet. While your child is sitting on the toilet, you might let your child read a story book or listen to the radio.

3. **Medicine**--Many laxatives are available to treat constipation in children. The choice of laxative depends on the age of your child and how bad the constipation is. Ask your family doctor to suggest a brand name and tell you how much to use.

To get rid of constipation, try all of these things. If the constipation doesn't get better, bring your child to see your family doctor. Sometimes an illness is the cause of the problem.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

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