



A health series to educate families on well-being issues with their children

A collaborative effort of Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC and The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center



UPMC

What is Constipation?

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What is Constipation?

- Not going to the bathroom to stool (poop) often. The pattern of how often is different for every person.
- This might cause abdominal discomfort, cramps and having to push really hard.
- Sometimes, hardened stools hurt coming out.
- Some children start to “withhold” or refuse to go because it might hurt.
- When a child is learning to potty train – this is a common problem.
- When a child or teen has major transitions in life, a change in bowel routine is common.
- Feeling stressed is often a contributing factor to constipation.
- Constipation can often be treated with simple measures.

How often should a child/teen have a bowel movement?

- As a baby, most infants have many stools every day.
- By age 2, most kids have at least 1 stool every day.
- For older children/teens, every child is different. Some go 2-3 times a day. Others have bowel movements every 2 to 3 days.

What are the signs of constipation?

A child/teen might:

- Have fewer bowel movements than his or her normal pattern.
- Feel pain when having a bowel movement.
- Arch his or her back and cry (if still a baby).
- Avoid going to the bathroom, do a “dance,” or hide when he or she feels a bowel movement coming. This is common in potty training or when starting school.
- Severe constipation can actually have leakage around the hardened stools, so it may dirty underwear. It can be confusing because it looks like watery diarrhea.





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What happens if constipation is untreated?

- Many children have periods of mild or brief constipation.
- Constipation and avoiding painful stooling is often a repeating cycle.
- Ongoing (> 2 weeks) or long term constipation can significantly inhibit daily activities and function in school and at home.
- Very severe constipation can lead to long term changes in the child/teen's physical ability to control or evacuate stool.

What if a child/teen gets constipated?

Constipation usually gets better with some simple changes:

- Eat more fruit, vegetables, cereal, and other foods with fiber.
- Avoid refined sugar foods – cookies, sugar cereals, candy, soda pop.
- Drink ½ cup of 100% prune juice, apple juice, or pear juice a day.
- For older children, drink at least 32 ounces of water every day.
- Sit on the toilet for 5 or 10 minutes after meals.
 - The child MAY NOT have a bowel movement, but this trains the child's body that this is a good time to relax.
 - This simple routine will help the child.
- If you are “working on potty training” just take a break for a few days.
- For school age children, having a routine of sitting on the toilet in the morning, after school and after dinner can help the child develop a pattern.
- Giving the child space and privacy in the bathroom can help.

What might make constipation worse?

- Stress.
- Big changes in routine and home environment can be really difficult on a young person's bowel habits. Many people (adults and children) have stomach problems when feeling stressed. Constipation can often flare.
- New situations in school (big tests or making new friends) can also bring extra stress to the body and increase constipation.
- Putting pressure on the child to stool, even if well intended, can add to the child's fear. Be patient.
- Shaming the child for accidents or struggles will increase the cycle of painful stooling and withholding. Constipation is a medical condition that takes patience and time to resolve.





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When should I take a child to the doctor?

You should have the child seen if:

- He or she is younger than 4 months old.
- He or she gets constipated often.
- There is blood in the bowel movement or on the diaper or underwear.
- The child/teen is in serious pain.
- Sometimes, constipation or blood in the stools is a symptom of an illness that should be addressed.
- Rarely, in serious cases, hospital stays are warranted for a thorough evaluation.

Are there medicines that can help?

The doctor may prescribe medicine if constipation is an ongoing problem:

- Follow the directions exactly.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about anything that you do not understand.
- Some medicines are enemas that are given into the child's rectum.
- Some medicines are taken every day to keep the stools soft and moving.

Content Sources:

American Academy of Pediatrics: www.healthychildren.org

Center for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov

KidsHealth, Nemours Center for Children's Health Media: www.kidshealth.org

National Center for Environmental Health: www.cdc.gov/nceh

Up To Date: www.uptodate.com

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