

Constipation

Constipation in infants

It's normal for infants to strain when passing a bowel movement. Going is more of a challenge because they are lying flat and don't have the forces of gravity to help "move" things along.

Breastfed babies tend to go more often than formula-fed babies since breast milk is more easily digested. At around 3-6 weeks old, breastfed babies may start having fewer bowel movements, sometimes only one or two a week. Constipation can occur when babies transition from breast milk to formula or from baby food to solid food. If your infant is constipated during the transition from breast milk or into solid foods, try serving just a few ounces of prune juice each day.

Babies who cry when passing a bowel movement or have hard or pebble-like stool might be constipated. If you think your baby's constipated, talk to your doctor, who may recommend giving her a little extra water to soften hard stool. Never give a baby laxatives, suppositories or enemas.

A good rule of thumb, as long as the stool remains soft (regardless of how frequent the bowel movements are or if there is straining), your baby is probably not constipated.

If your baby's symptoms don't improve or if she has signs of illness like vomiting, fever, lethargy, lack of appetite or blood in the stool, call your doctor right away.

Constipation in kids

Constipation is a very common problem among kids. A child is considered constipated when she has fewer than three bowel movements in a week; has difficulty having a bowel movement; or when the stools are hard, dry and unusually large.

Constipation usually isn't a cause for concern — it's preventable and most cases can be remedied with healthy eating and exercise habits.

Causes

Constipation is usually due to a diet that doesn't include enough water and dietary fiber, which help the bowels move properly. Kids who eat a high-fat diet or too much processed food may experience constipation more often. Antidepressants and medications used to treat iron deficiencies can also lead to constipation.

Kids who avoid going to the bathroom, even when they really have the urge to go, can cause themselves to become constipated. They might ignore internal urges because they don't want to stop playing a fun game, use a restroom away from home or have to ask an adult to be excused to go to the

bathroom. When they ignore the urge to go, it's harder to go later on.

Stress can also lead to constipation. Research has shown that emotional upsets can affect how well the gut functions and can cause constipation, as well as other conditions, like diarrhea.

Some kids get constipated because of a condition called irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which can occur as a result of stress or eating fatty or spicy trigger foods. A child with IBS may have either constipation or diarrhea, as well as stomach pain and gas.

In rare cases, constipation is a sign of other medical illnesses, so keep your doctor informed if your child continues to have problems, or if the constipation lasts for two to three weeks.

Symptoms

A child who doesn't have a bowel movement every day isn't necessarily constipated. One child might go three times a day, while another might go once every three days. Usually a child is constipated when she is going less than usual.

Other complaints may include:

- feeling full or bloated
- saying it hurts to poop
- straining to poop
- blood on the toilet paper
- going less than usual

Prevention and treatment

- **Give your child more fluids.** The amount of fluids kids need will vary according to weight and age. Most school-age children need three to four glasses of water each day. If the constipation persists, call your doctor.
- **Serve more fiber.** Foods high in fiber, such as fruits, vegetables and whole-grain bread, can help prevent constipation. Fiber can't be digested, so it helps clean out the intestines by moving the bowels along. Try apples, oatmeal, oranges, bananas, baked potatoes and popcorn.
- **Make sure kids get enough exercise.** Physical activity nudges the bowels into action.
- **Develop a regular meal schedule.** Regular meals may help kids develop routine bowel habits. If necessary, schedule breakfast a little earlier to give your child a chance for a relaxed visit to the bathroom before school.

Constipation (continued)

- **Get kids into the habit of going.** Encourage kids to sit on the toilet for at least 10 minutes at about the same time each day, preferably after a meal.

Talk with the doctor before giving your child any kind of over-the-counter medication for constipation.