



Constipation in Young Children

When a child has hard stool that causes difficult and painful bowel movements, it is called constipation. Constipation is common in children. There are a number of possible reasons for constipation including diet, inadequate fluid intake, “holding back” behaviors, and special needs.

Normal Bowel Function

The role of the large intestine (bowel) is to move the body’s waste and absorb water and salts from the contents until stool is formed and then eliminated during a bowel movement. Children may have regular bowel movements (going to the toilet at the same time each day) or they may be irregular. Some children will have a bowel movement three times a day, and for others, normal will be every two or three days. The frequency is less important than having soft stool that is easy to pass. Small, hard, dry stools that look like pebbles may indicate constipation.

“Holding Back”

Sometimes constipation starts when one hard stool has caused pain. The child may respond by “holding back” and resisting the body’s signal to have a bowel movement. This can cause gas, pain and decreased appetite, making the problem worse. A child with constipation may be irritable, less energetic and less playful.

The process of toilet learning can also cause a change in bowel habits. Be careful not to force a child who isn’t ready to learn to use the toilet and do not punish children for toileting accidents. If a child becomes constipated while learning to use the toilet and is “holding back,” put him back in diapers until he’s ready to try again.

Children may also ignore the urge to use the toilet when they are busy playing, involved in an activity or uncomfortable using a toilet away from home. Use matter-of-fact words that are non-judgmental to help children learn to manage their toileting needs.

Diet and Constipation

A diet that is high in refined sugars, starches and milk products, but low in vegetables, fruits and whole grains (fiber) can contribute to constipation. Fiber (also called bulk or roughage) refers to the parts of plants that are eaten and not digested. Dietary fiber plays an important part in keeping the stool soft and easy to pass.

Western diets, especially those of young children, often do not have enough fiber. Fiber is not found in foods from animal sources, so a diet that is based mostly on meat, dairy and eggs will not provide enough. There is little fiber in most convenience or “junk” foods such as cookies, crackers, candies, cakes and chips. It is best to prevent constipation by offering plenty of fruits and vegetables such as apricots, pears, plums, prunes, peaches, berries, avocados, tomatoes, peas, carrots, broccoli, peas, beans and whole grains like oats, brown rice, barley, and whole wheat.

How to Provide More Fiber

Fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes and whole grain cereals and breads are the usual sources of dietary fiber. When choosing food for snacks and meals in your program, include a variety of items from plant sources. Read food labels on canned, frozen and packaged foods for information about the food’s fiber content. A child’s daily intake from all sources of fiber should total the age of the child plus 5, measured in grams (AAP). For example, for a 4-year-old, 4+5=9 grams.

Example of 9 grams of fiber:

- ½ cup cooked oats = 2 grams
- ¼ cup green peas = 2 grams
- 3 strawberries = 1 gram
- ¼ cup cooked lentils = 4 grams

continued

Ideas for Increasing Fruits, Vegetables and Whole Grains:

- Introduce (one at a time) small servings of iron-fortified cereals, fruits, vegetables and legumes for infants from 6 to 12 months.
- As the child gets older, provide a more varied diet and gradually increase fiber over time.
- Teach children self-help skills of cutting up fruits and vegetables (with supervision.)
- Add wheat bran when preparing baked goods.
- Serve oatmeal, brown rice and whole wheat bread for snacks.
- Top banana pieces with wheat germ.
- Have children prepare fruit kabobs.
- Make pancakes with whole-grain flour and top with fruit.
- Include lessons about how food grows in your daily activities.
- Limit crackers, cake, chips and cookies.

If a child is a “picky eater” remember that a food may need to be offered 10 times before a child will try it.

Other Health Benefits of Dietary Fiber

Obesity occurs less often in people who eat plenty of fiber. When people eat low-density foods that have lots of fiber, they feel full sooner, and consume fewer calories. Diets with more fiber can also lower fat and cholesterol in the blood and reduce the risk of heart disease. Fiber slows the absorption of sugar and has been associated with a reduced risk of developing type 2 Diabetes. When combined with drinking adequate fluids, high-fiber food helps digestion and promotes bowel health.

Offer a Variety of Foods

Although dietary fiber is healthful, it must be noted that children need a varied diet that provides the necessary vitamins, minerals and protein. A diet that only offers low-calorie, high fiber foods and excludes other kinds of food is not recommended for children.

Fluids

Drinking too little fluid, especially on hot days or when a child has a fever, can make a child constipated. Make sure that young children have fluids at meals and throughout the day. Water is a good choice to quench thirst and provide hydration. Too much milk can decrease the appetite for other foods that children

need and sugary drinks are linked to obesity and tooth decay. Limit milk to 16-24 ounces in a day and 100% fruit juice to 4 ounces per day. Avoid soda and juice drinks.

Children with Special Needs

Children with special needs experience constipation more frequently than typically developing children. This may be due to limited physical activity, medications, poor muscle tone, inadequate food and fluid intake or developmental delay. A decrease in activity due to injury or illness can also cause constipation. Be sure to include toileting and elimination issues in a child’s IEP or special health needs care plan.

Working with Parents

Communicate with families about the child’s bowel habits. Respect cultural expectations of toileting. Keep in mind that there are many words to describe bowel movements and try to use words that are familiar to the parent and child. Ask parents about the child’s diet at home. Provide information about a healthy diet that includes lots of fruits and vegetables and whole grains.

When to Contact a Health Professional

Sometimes a child may need help from a health professional for constipation. A pediatrician may recommend stool softeners or laxatives and will evaluate for other problems. Ask the parents to contact their health care provider if the child has not had a bowel movement in more than three days or if the child is experiencing pain that becomes worse.

References and Resources

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