

Constipation

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Your child has constipation if he passes stools less frequently than usual. His stools are also hard, dry and difficult to pass. Constipation is rarely a sign of a serious health problem. Common causes of constipation include stool withholding, inadequate intake of water, lack of fibre in daily diet, minor change in diet such as a switch from baby food to solid food and certain medications.

Is there a 'Normal' Frequency of Bowel Movements?

There is no 'normal' frequency of bowel movements. For children, the number of bowel movements changes according to his age and diet. Each child has his own pattern of bowel movements. As long as your child is growing well, is energetic, and passes stools easily, the frequency of his bowel movements is not important. However, it is ideal to have a similar pattern of bowel movements every week.

Watch Out For

Take your child to see a doctor if he experiences constipation for more than 1 week, or if his constipation is accompanied by one of the following symptoms:

- ▶ Fever
- ▶ Vomiting
- ▶ Blood in stool
- ▶ A swollen abdomen
- ▶ Weight loss
- ▶ Delayed passage of stools after birth



What to Do

- ▶ Establish a regular bowel routine for your child.
- ▶ Get your child to drink adequate amounts of water everyday. Water helps to soften stools.
- ▶ Include fibre at every meal. It helps hold water in the stool, thus making the stools softer and easier to pass. It also provides the bulk that the colon muscles need to stimulate the forward motion of the stools. However, too much fibre can also cause constipation. So ensure that you feed your child fibre in moderate amounts.
- ▶ Encourage your child to be active in school and at home. Staying active is an excellent way to keep the bowels moving.
- ▶ Help your child stay relaxed. Too much stress in school may affect your child's regular bowel movements. Learn to encourage your child to express his emotions.



Reminder:
It is not advisable to give your child laxatives or administer an enema unless prescribed by the doctor. Laxatives can sometimes impair normal functioning of the colon (large intestines).

Anal fissure

Injury to the canal of the anus may happen if your child is constipated and is trying to pass a hard stool. This may cause an anal fissure. An anal fissure is a tear in the lining of the anus that causes pain during bowel movements.

Teach Your Child Good Toilet Habits

Stool withholding is a common cause of constipation among children. Your child may withhold his stools because he is feeling stressed out about toilet training, does not want to interrupt his playtime or is fearful of having a painful or unpleasant bowel movement.

When your child resists the urge to have a bowel movement for a long period of time, his normal bowel reflexes may be affected. Eventually, his stools will build up in his bowels and subsequently become harder and larger. Constipation usually does not have any long-term consequences, but it may cause your child to feel uncomfortable and emotionally stressed out throughout the day.



One of the things you can do for your child is to try to make going to the toilet a pleasant experience. Here are some tips on how you can establish good bowel habits:

Do's

- ✓ Get your child to wake up about half an hour earlier in the mornings to give him extra time to use the toilet before school.
- ✓ The best time to encourage a bowel movement is after a meal, any time from immediately after the meal to about an hour after it. This is because mass peristalsis (a wave of contraction that passes round the entire colon, pushing its contents forwards) occurs mostly at mealtimes, especially breakfast.
- ✓ Encourage your child to sit on the toilet bowl for a while at about the same time each day, even if he does not have a bowel movement.
- ✓ Praise him whenever he is able to pass a bowel movement.
- ✓ Teach your child to go to the toilet whenever he has an urge to 'poop'.

Don'ts

- ✗ Don't hurry your child when he is sitting on the toilet bowl. On the other hand, don't let him remain there for too long.
- ✗ Don't force him to sit on the toilet bowl if he really does not want to.
- ✗ Don't scold him if there is no bowel movement.