

A Caregiver's Overview to Constipation in Children

Constipation is a common problem in children. This handout will give you an overview on the basics of constipation, so that you will be able to recognize it in your child, know when to contact a health care provider, and become familiar with some of the causes, prevention, and treatments for constipation.

What is constipation?

Constipation occurs when a child has less than two bowel movements per week or has hard and dry stools with painful bowel movements. Constipation can be caused by stool moving too slowly through the colon. Constipation can also happen when muscles at the end of the large intestine tighten, preventing the stool to pass as it normally does. The stool becomes drier and firmer the longer it stays there, making it even harder and more painful for the muscles to push it out of the body.



Signs and symptoms

- Feeling bloated
- Abdominal pain
- Bleeding with bowel movements
- Urinary incontinence
- Soiling in-between bowel movements
- Irregular, dancelike behaviors. For example, if your child is standing on his or her tiptoes and rocking back and forth.

Common causes

- Ignoring the need to have a bowel movement. Children may be afraid, uncomfortable to go in an unfamiliar toilet such as a public restroom, or they may not want to go in the middle of an activity.
- Diets low in fiber
- Not drinking enough fluid
- Medications

Prevention and treatment

- Increasing fiber and water intake in your child's diet
- Physical activity for your child, with a goal of 60 minutes per day
- Regular meal times
- Regular toilet time- going to the bathroom 30-60 minutes after each meal and snack



Slowly increase FIBER in your child's diet by adding

- Whole grain cereals and bread products
- Fruits, vegetables, and legumes
- A fiber supplement can be added to foods and beverages
- Ground flaxseed or flaxseed meal can be added to foods, including cereals and smoothies

Foods with little or no fiber, such as refined grains and processed foods, should be limited.

Adequate Intake of Fiber for Children

Age (years)	Total Fiber Intake (g/day)
1-3	19
4-8	25
Boys: 9-13	31
Girls: 9-13	26

Individualize

Every child's bowel patterns are different, so become aware of your child's typical bowel movements, including the size and consistency of stools. This can help you and your pediatrician know when your child has constipation and how serious it is.

Good Sources of Dietary Fiber

	Grams of Fiber
Fruit	
1 medium apple with skin	3
1 medium pear with skin	4
1/2 cup blackberries	4
Vegetables and Legumes	
1/2 cup greens, cooked	3
1 medium sweet potato with skin	3
1/2 cup beans, cooked	6-8
Breads and Cereals	
1 slice whole-wheat bread	2-3
1 cup oatmeal, cooked	4
1/2 cup shredded wheat cereal	3
1/2 cup 100% bran cereal	9-10

For more information on the fiber content of foods, visit:

www.nationalfiberCouncil.org/food_chart.shtml

When to see a health care provider

- If constipation symptoms last for longer than two weeks.
- In more serious cases of constipation, enemas, laxatives, or oral therapies may need to be prescribed.
- In rare cases, certain diseases and conditions can cause constipation, such as botulism and diabetes.
- To diagnose constipation in children, a health care provider will need to take a medical history, do a physical exam, and may order tests.

Constipation is a frequent problem in children. However, there are many ways to prevent and treat constipation by adopting positive lifestyle and dietary habits.