

Childhood constipation- Information for parents and patients

What is constipation?

Constipation is the inability to move the bowels regularly or completely empty them. It is a common condition in children. Normal bowel habit can range from 2-3 bowel motions per day to once every third day and should be type 3 or 4 shown in Figure 1. Often with constipation stool (poo) can be like rabbit droppings (Type 1) or very large, infrequent and can sometimes block the toilet!



Figure 1

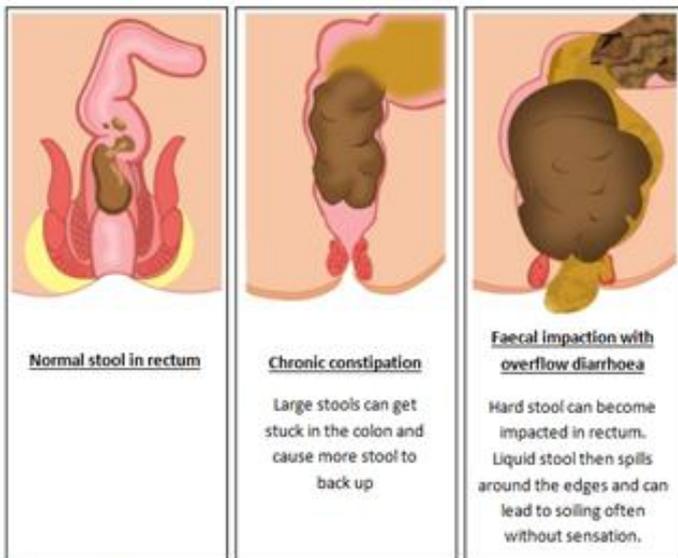


Figure 2

Soiling (accidents) can occur in severe constipation or faecal impaction- this is where liquid stool runs past hard stool blocking the bowel causing “overflow” diarrhoea. This overflow stool can be very smelly, thick and sticky or dry and flaky, and is often passed without your child feeling or being able to control it as shown on the far right image in Figure 2. Follow this link for a video explaining some more about what happens in the bowel: www.thepoonurses.uk.

What causes constipation?

For many children there is no identifiable physical cause for their constipation. This is known as **Idiopathic Constipation**. Contributing factors include; fear of the toilet, withholding poo (if embarrassed to use the toilet e.g. at school), no toilet routine, unbalanced diet, dehydration, anxiety/emotional upset, change in routine and some medications.

If your child has any of the following features it may suggest constipation is caused by an **underlying illness** that you should see your doctor about; no meconium in first 48 hours of life, weight loss or failure to gain weight, vomiting, swollen stretched tummy, severe pain, very pale stools, urinary symptoms, sores/ulcers near the anus, neurological problems (weakness and numbness) or excessive thirst.

Why is it important to treat constipation?

If left untreated, constipation can cause the bowel to stretch which reduces its ability to squeeze poo through and can make it large, weak and flabby. It can also reduce your child's appetite and cause urinary problems like bed wetting. It is therefore important to ensure all children with constipation are identified and treated early. Follow this link for help **spotting the signs of constipation in children**: <https://www.eric.org.uk/signs-of-constipation> and speak to your health visitor, school nurse or healthcare provider.

How to treat constipation

Treating constipation in children requires a combination of measures including establishing a toileting routine, following a healthy diet and regular laxative use. Laxatives are also used in the treatment of overflow diarrhoea to help remove large, hard or impacted lumps of stool blocking the bowel.

Routine- Encourage your child to sit on the toilet for 10-15 minutes after meals and before bed. Make sure they are comfortable by supporting their feet- this can help keep them on the loo longer! Certain positions can also help with moving the bowels as shown in Figure 3.

Star charts can be helpful to make toileting fun. Praise is more effective than punishment: reward your child for following a toileting routine rather than successful bowel motions or accident free periods. It can be helpful to make sure all adults caring for your child are following this for example your child's school nurse and teachers.

Exercise- Encourage lots of active play every day as this stimulates bowel movement. Lack of exercise can make the bowels sluggish.



Figure 3

Food	Grams of Fibre
Fruits	
Apple with skin (medium)	3.5
Pear with skin	4.6
Peach with skin	2.1
Raspberries (1 cup)	5.1
Vegetables, Cooked	
Broccoli (1 stalk)	5.0
Carrots (1 cup)	4.6
Cauliflower (1 cup)	2.1
Beans, Cooked	
Kidney beans (½ cup)	7.4
Lima beans (½ cup)	2.6
Navy beans (½ cup)	3.1
Whole Grains, Cooked	
Whole-wheat cereal (1 cup flakes)	3.0
Whole-wheat bread (1 slice)	1.7

Figure 4- High fibre foods

Diet- Diet and hydration are important factors in achieving normal bowel function. Ensuring you child is getting plenty of **fluid and fibre** can help get the bowels moving and stop constipation returning. Children aged 4-8 years should drink around 1.2 litres of water-based fluid daily, spaced evenly throughout the day. For 9-13 year olds this increases to around 1.5 litres. Fibre helps retain fluid in poo making it soft and easier to push out. Some examples of high fibre foods are listed in **Figure 4**. Make fruit and veg more fun to eat by preparing them in different ways, for example apple rings, orange wedges, carrot and cucumber sticks. Avoiding processed foods (sweets, crisps, biscuits) and fizzy drinks is

also important as these can fill your child up at the expense of high fibre alternatives. Advice on how to meet your child's daily fibre target can be found here: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-get-more-fibre-into-your-diet/>.

Laxatives- There are 2 types of laxatives used for the treatment of constipation; **bowel stimulants** (senna) and **stool softeners** (laxido/movicol or lactulose). Bowel stimulants help the bowel to squeeze out stool whereas stool softeners help to soften hard/impacted stool so it is easier to push out. Often a combination of both is required. Occasionally stronger medicines or enemas are needed. Your nurse or doctor can advise you on which preparations are appropriate for your child.

Laxative treatment will be required for roughly the same length of time your child has been constipated. It is important not to stop laxatives too soon as constipation can come back!! This is because constipation stretches the bowel making it less effective at squeezing stool through. It can take some time for the bowel to recover and so it is important for your child to continue taking a "maintenance" dose of laxatives after normal bowel habit has resumed. This may be required for weeks, months or even years. The aim is to have your child passing 1-2 formed stools (Type 3 or 4) per day. A helpful age-specific **disimpaction guide** for parents and advice on how to continue with maintenance laxatives can be found here: <https://www.eric.org.uk/pdf-a-parents-guide-to-disimpaction>. To find out how to **prepare laxatives** for your child follow this link: <https://www.eric.org.uk/pdf-how-to-prepare-macrogol-laxatives>.

Most of the time constipation is treated successfully, but in some cases it can take a long time and requires on-going support from health professionals and **lots of patience and encouragement from parents and carers**. If your child starts soiling, complaining of a sore tummy or loses their appetite (which may come back after moving bowels) it may mean they are becoming constipated again and you should contact your health visitor, school nurse or healthcare provider for advice.

For confidential help and advice from NHS Grampian Bowel and Bladder Specialist Nurses you can also contact the **Children's Bladder and Bowel Advice Line** on
01467 672778.

They provide help and advice between 2-4pm every Tuesday on day and night time wetting, constipation, soiling and equipment.

Further helpful resources:

- 1- The poo nurses- www.thepoonurses.uk
 - Guidance for parents and carers on laxative use for constipation, disimpaction and maintenance. Helpful video on what happens in the bowel and how overflow diarrhoea occurs.
- 2- Squatty potty- www.squattypotty.com
 - Website selling "squatty potties"- foot rests for the toilet. Has some fun and cheeky videos to help explain constipation- parents should watch first and decide if suitable for their children- lots of bright colours and unicorns!
- 3- Eric- www.eric.org.uk

- Eric is a Children's bowel and bladder charity. The website has loads of really helpful information on constipation, in particular:
 - Disimpaction guide- <https://www.eric.org.uk/pdf-a-parents-guide-to-disimpaction>.
 - How to prepare macrogol laxatives-<https://www.eric.org.uk/pdf-how-to-prepare-macrogol-laxatives>.
 - There is also a helpline 0845 370 8008 open Mon-Thurs 10am-2pm or email info@eric.org.uk.
- 4- Bowel and Bladder- <https://www.bladderandbowel.org/bowel/bowel-problems/childhood-bowel-problems/>
- Information and guidance on constipation and other common childhood continence issues.

Information/images contained in this leaflet have been taken from the above resources plus:

NHS Grampian Children bladder and bowel pathway toolkit
 NHS Grampian Paediatric constipation and encopresis resource pack
 NHS Grampian Guidance- Constipation- Paediatrics
 NHS Grampian- Diet and Constipation, parent information leaflet
<https://www.healthychildren.org>
<http://www.paediatrics.uct.ac.za>
<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-get-more-fibre-into-your-diet/>.