

Constipation in Kids: Causes and Solutions



Highlights

Children's bowel habits can vary.

Worry only if bowel movements cause a problem, such as pain or blood in the stool.

Simple dietary changes and healthy bowel habits can help with constipation.

Constipation is common, especially in babies and during toilet training.

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What is Constipation?

Constipation occurs when a child has difficulty passing stool or has hard poo. In addition to infrequent bowel movements, children with constipation may also experience discomfort or pain when passing stool.

Constipation is common, particularly in babies and toddlers during toilet training. It usually improves with age and stabilizes by age 4.

What is Normal for Children?

Bowel habits vary from child to child. While most children pass stool at least once every 2 to 3 days, some may go up to three times a day, and some may have fewer bowel movements, particularly breastfed babies.

For example, some breastfed babies may poo only once a week, while others may poo after every feed.

What Are the Symptoms of Constipation in Children?

Signs of constipation include:

- Pain or discomfort while passing stool
- Irritability and refusal to sit on the toilet
- Stomach pain
- Reduced appetite
- Rocking, fidgeting, or crossing legs to avoid pooing
- Accidental soiling of underwear

Babies with constipation may have dry, crumbly stools and may cry or experience pain when passing stool. Some children may develop an anal fissure (a small tear in the anus) due to straining, which can cause bleeding.

What Causes Constipation in Children?

Constipation in children can be caused by a variety of factors:

Inadequate fiber intake

Excessive milk consumption without enough solid foods

Illnesses that reduce appetite

Certain medications \ (e.g., some cough syrups\)

Fear or discomfort related to bowel movements, often after experiencing pain

Toilet training issues \ (common in toddlers\)

Starting school, which can disrupt routine

In a small number of cases, constipation may be caused by medical conditions.

How is the Cause of Constipation Diagnosed in Children?

A doctor will assess the child's symptoms and ask about:

The onset of difficulty

The appearance of stools

Any pain during bowel movements

Dietary changes \ (e.g., introducing solid foods, fiber intake\)

A physical examination may include palpating the abdomen and checking the anus.

Tests are rarely required unless the constipation is severe or persistent.

When Should My Child See a Doctor?

Consult a doctor if your child:

Has not passed stool for a week

Experiences accidental soiling

Has a very sore anus

Is not eating or drinking enough

Infants under 12 months with suspected constipation should also be evaluated by a doctor.

When to Seek Urgent Care

Seek urgent medical care if your child has constipation along with:

Fever

Vomiting
Blood in the stool
Severe pain

How is Constipation Treated?

Self-Care at Home

For toddlers and older children:

Increase fiber intake through fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
Consider natural laxatives, such as prune juice, which can be mixed with other juices or frozen into ice treats.
Encourage healthy bowel habits by not holding in stool.
Help your child feel comfortable on the toilet, using a footstool if necessary.
Praise efforts to sit on the toilet, even if the child does not poo.

For formula-fed babies, a change in formula may help.

Medicines for Constipation

Laxatives may be prescribed by a doctor, but they should not be given to children without medical advice.

Can Constipation Be Prevented?

Preventing constipation is often possible by ensuring a diet rich in fiber, proper hydration, and encouraging regular toilet habits.

Complications of Constipation

Chronic constipation can lead to issues such as fecal incontinence (soiling), which can impact a child's quality of life.

Tools and Assistance

Here are some tools and resources to help you manage childhood constipation:

Local Health Services: Reach out to your pediatrician or healthcare provider for professional care and diagnosis.

Healthcare Resources: Fact sheets, professional medical advice, and online platforms for managing constipation in children.

Parenting Support Groups: Access online communities where parents share experiences and tips for managing constipation in children.

Dietary Guidance: Consult with a pediatric nutritionist for advice on diet modifications to help prevent constipation.