



# Constipation

Issued by Child Health

This leaflet explains what constipation is, some of the causes of constipation in children and some of the treatment options.

## Causes of constipation in children

It is common for young children to become constipated.

Everyone's bowel habits are different. Some people open their bowels daily others every three days. What is normal for one person may not be for another.

Constipation is a change from your child's normal bowel habit, resulting in a hard stool (poo) which can cause discomfort and pain. The hard stool may be difficult to pass and cause excessive straining.

Constipation can happen if there is not enough fibre in your child's diet or if your child does not drink enough during the day.

Sometimes in young children constipation can start when toilet training. If your child is fearful of using the toilet or potty they can 'hold on' and not open their bowels to avoid using the toilet or potty.

Other causes of constipation include:

- Stress
- Concern about using unfamiliar toilets
- Ignoring the signal to empty their bowel
- Lack of exercise or activity.

Some children with long-term constipation may have a problem with soiling. The child cannot help soiling or smearing of underclothes as the back passage is held open by hard stools. This is caused by an overflow of liquid or runny stools which bypasses the hard stool. Try not to become upset or frustrated with your child if this happens.



## Signs and symptoms of constipation

Your child may have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Irregular bowel activity
- Occasionally passing large, very hard stools
- Alternating hard and runny stools
- Foul smelling wind or stools
- Straining to pass stools
- Day time or night time bed wetting
- Poor appetite
- Lack of energy
- Changes in mood or irritability

## What can I do?

If your child is under five years old or pre-school please seek additional support from your health visitor.

- Encourage plenty of drinks to keep hydrated. This helps to makes the stool soft and easy to pass. Jelly and ice-lollies are another way to give fluid.
- Encourage a good mealtime routine, including breakfast, dinner and tea. Try to eat together at the table.
- Involve your child in the planning and preparation of meals, especially if their appetite is poor.
- Aim for five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. This can be fresh, tinned, frozen or dried varieties.
- Try to choose foods high in fibre. This will help to bulk your child's poo. Choose cereals such as porridge, weetabix, shreddies and cheerios – supermarket own brands are also available. Use high fibre or wholegrain bread. High fibre white bread and soft grain white bread are good alternative choices. Choose wholegrain or brown pasta and rice. If your child is reluctant to try these, you can try half white and half wholegrain varieties.



## Handy tips

- Encourage your child to sit on the potty or toilet and try to open their bowels and pass a stool at least twice a day. A good time to do this is 20 minutes after meals, for example after breakfast and tea. Eating causes a natural reflex which stimulates the bowel. Also allow your child to sit on the potty or toilet when they feel the urge to open their bowels.
- Sitting on the toilet should never be used as a punishment. Make the potty or toilet fun and comfortable. Reading books or listening to music can encourage a relaxed atmosphere.
- Keeping a diary can help by acting as a reminder for routines, identifying causes and show patterns of behaviour.
- Instant reward systems may work for some children. Good rewards include praise, cuddles, going on an outing, playing a game or star charts.
- If you continue to have concerns or the situation does not improve seek advice from your doctor, school nurse or health visitor.

The treatment of constipation may be frustrating as your child may not co-operate. It can take a few weeks or months to resolve, so please be patient.

Constipation is usually managed in the outpatient clinic; however hospital admission is sometimes needed.



## What medication is available?

Your child may also need a medicine to help with their constipation. Your child's doctor will decide if a medicine is needed.

There are a variety of medicines available, some are outlined below:

**Movicol/Laxido (macrogols)** are powders which are made into a drink with water, which softens the stool making it easier to pass. You can mix these with cordial if needed. It may take several days to work. It is sometimes given in large doses over a week to clear out a constipated bowel.

**Lactulose** is a liquid medicine which helps to soften the stool.

**Sennokot** is a liquid medicine or capsule, which helps stimulate the bowel to open.

## Complications and risks

Complications and risks associated with constipation are rare.

## Further information:

Please go to the ERIC website for friendly advice about managing your child's constipation: [www.ERIC.org.uk](http://www.ERIC.org.uk)

If you need further information please ring 0344 811 8111 and ask to speak to the Children's ward.







## **Alternative Formats**

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

## **Other sources of information**

### **NHS 111**

### **NHS Choices**

[www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx)

### **NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)**

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: [northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk)

### **Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust**

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

[www.northumbria.nhs.uk](http://www.northumbria.nhs.uk)

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