

Symptoms

Constipation is best defined as the painful passage of hard, dry stool or the inability to have a bowel movement (BM). Some children have bowel movements only once every few days. Breastfed babies may have BM's once a week. If the stools are soft and not painful, this is not constipation. Most babies grunt, strain, turn red, and draw up their legs when having a bowel movement. Unless the stools are dry and hard, this is not constipation.

Causes

Often, no reason is found for a child's constipation. However, some causes are as follows:

- Diets low in fiber
- Diets with excessive cow's milk
- In toddlers, waiting too long to use the bathroom
- Small tears in the rectum that make stool passage painful

If bowel movements are repeatedly painful, most children will start withholding bowel movements and will have more constipation. Part of the treatment of constipation is to break this cycle of pain leading to increased stool holding.

Treatment

Changes in diet and bowel habits usually relieve constipation. Allow two to four weeks for diet changes to work. The following tips may help:

- For infants younger than 4 months old, start by adding two ounces of pear or prune juice twice daily. Results are usually seen within a week.
- For babies 4-12 months old, add 4-6 ounces of pear or prune juice twice daily.
- For babies eating solid foods, increase the servings of pears, prunes, apples, peas, spinach, and beets.
- For older children, the easiest source of fiber is whole grains. Breakfast cereals like Frosted Mini Wheats, Raisin Bran, Cracklin' Oat Bran, and oatmeal are high in fiber. For bread use only "100% Whole Wheat" bread. Try cooking bran muffins based on a high fiber cereal like Fiber One or All-Bran.
- For older children, encourage a diet high in fruits and vegetables. Any kind of cooked or baked bean is usually very high in fiber. For vegetables, broccoli, carrots, corn, green beans, and peas are good choices. For fruits, try apples with the peel, dates, oranges, pears, strawberries, and raisins.
- After 12 months old, limit cow's milk to 16 ounces per day.
- For potty-trained children, encourage them to sit on the toilet for 10 minutes after a meal at least twice per day. Use rewards and encouragement.

If constipation is not improving or you are worried about symptoms, an appointment should be made to fully review the problem and perform a thorough exam.