

Chronic constipation

Patient information

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Whiston Hospital
Warrington Road,
Prescot, Merseyside, L35 5DR
Telephone: 0151 426 1600

St Helens Hospital
Marshalls Cross Road,
St Helens, Merseyside, WA9 3DA
Telephone: 01744 26633

Southport Hospital
Town Lane, Kew,
Southport, Merseyside,
PR8 6PN
Telephone: 01704 547 471

Ormskirk Hospital
Dicconson Way, Wigan Road,
Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 2AZ
Telephone: 01695 577 111

Children with constipation and soiling

Normal bowel habits can vary considerably in frequency amongst people. A child with bowel movements less than 3 times per week, is probably constipated. However, pain and/or excessive straining with discomfort during bowel movements are abnormal and are suggestive of constipation.

Chronic constipation is a slightly different, yet much more challenging condition to treat. Because chronic constipation can lead to long term discomfort and loss of bowel control, it can be very stressful for both parents and kids.

Faecal soiling of underwear in school children is usually due to constipation with 'overflow'. It is more difficult to recognise constipation in a child who appears to have daily bowel movements, but passes only small amount of faeces (poo) every time, therefore, not completely evacuating his/her bowels.








How common is constipation in children?

1 in 3 children suffer with constipation. It commonly starts around the potty training stage and can also affect babies. Constipation is an increasing problem.

Faecal soiling is a common complication of longstanding constipation and may affect 4-5% of school children. Soiling is involuntary and a very distressing problem to the child, which affects the whole family.

It often leads to social isolation and may be a source of bullying in school. About 20-30% of children with chronic constipation may develop urinary complications such as bedwetting, daytime urinary dribbling and repeated urine infections.

Bristol Stool Chart

Type 1		Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass)
Type 2		Sausage-shaped but lumpy
Type 3		Like a sausage but with cracks on the surface
Type 4		Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
Type 5		Soft blobs with clear-cut edges
Type 6		Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool
Type 7		Watery, no solid pieces. Entirely Liquid

Key points

- Soiling is involuntary and often a complication of chronic constipation.
- Improve fluid, fibre, fruit and vegetable intake. A gradual change to healthy eating for the whole family is more likely to succeed. Wholegrain breakfast cereals and wholemeal bread provides a good source of fibre. Laxatives require good fluid intake for optimum effect. It is recommended to have at least 7 - 8 fluid drinks per day.
- Daily bowel training (sitting on the toilet for 10 - 15 minutes) once or twice daily is important.
- Take laxatives regularly and avoid stopping the course without medical advice.
- A diary with a reward scheme during the first few months of management helps, the Bristol stool chart is on the next page to help with descriptions, you could just document the 'type' in the diary.
- It is important to keep regular appointments with the doctor and nurse who are supervising the management of your child's constipation.

Characteristics of constipation

Constipated children may present with painful bowel movements, repeated abdominal pains, blood in stools or when wiping the bottom or faecal soiling (usually with watery or pasty faeces).

Faecal soiling is involuntary overflow incontinence, due to retained large stools (poo). The child has no control of it nor is aware of it. Some children with chronic constipation may present with urinary problems, such as bedwetting or urinary dribbling.

What causes constipation?

Chronic constipation can be caused by many factors, but one common trigger is when a child decides to hold in their bowel movements. Children do this for any number of reasons ranging from a preference for nappies/pull up pants, to not wanting to interrupt play, or to simply being uncomfortable with using a toilet outside their home.

If a child continues to ignore their body's cues to go, their faeces becomes hard and the rectum fills with stool and stretches.

This has two consequences. A hard stool is painful to pass, and the child becomes more reluctant to go, creating a vicious cycle.

Over time, as the rectum stretches, the child will not feel the urge to go. The stool can build up until the child is no longer able hold it in, resulting in overflow incontinence, where leakage or accidents occur.

Why do children get constipated?

Beyond the first month of life, over 95% of children with constipation have no underlying disease causing the constipation. It is often difficult to identify the exact cause of constipation in the individual child.

Causes may involve one or, more likely, a combination of the following factors:

- Painful bowel movement is probably the common cause, particularly in toddlers. This pain may be due to anal fissure (skin crack around the anus), an infection around the anus or simply due to the passage of hard stools. Untreated, this may lead to withholding behaviour, typically in toddlers and pre-school children. This will lead to harder and more painful faeces. Untreated, this will continue into chronic constipation.
- Poor fluid and fibre intake may complicate an acute (brief) constipation. The child with established constipation may gradually choose to eat foods with high fibre, and become a fussy eater.
- Other possible causes include; lack of exercise (especially walking), delaying normal urge to open bowels (a child in a classroom, or deeply engaged in games) coercive toilet training, excessive milk intake and possible genetic predispositions in some patients.

Sodium Picosulfate - is a strong laxative. It draws water and salts into the large bowel. It is not suitable for regular daily intake for very long periods, but can be very useful in achieving a bowel clear out, and also in preventing the reoccurrence of soiling when given as weekend courses for several weeks. It is generally very well tolerated.

Micro enemas - are less effective, but much smaller and gentler than phosphate enemas.

Bowel retraining

This may be referred to as toilet training and it does not imply failure of toilet training. It often refers to the package of care given to a child with constipation during admission to hospital.

With longstanding constipation, the bowel loses its normal reflexes and will need retraining. It involves sitting on the toilet for 10-15 minutes regularly once or twice daily, preferably in the morning and after the main meal.

The child should be relaxed when trying to open his/her bowels. The child should be encouraged for trying no matter of the result. A favourite music may be played, or special story books are used.

Commonly used laxatives and their common side effects

Lactulose - is a form of a sugar, but is not normally absorbed. It draws water into faeces to soften them. It is non-toxic and sometimes high doses may be required. Side effects include wind, abdominal cramps and may affect teeth like other sugary foods, therefore, brush teeth after use. It may worsen soiling initially. It is available as liquid or powder.

Senna - is a plant extract and one of the oldest laxatives. It stimulates the large bowel to contract and evacuate the stools. It may cause abdominal cramps and pains. These often improve after sometime or with reducing the dose. It may stain the urine dark red. It is available as liquid, granules or tablets. It acts in 6-10 hours and best given at night.

Bisacodyl - is a stimulant laxative, with similar indications and side effects to senna.

Docusate sodium - is a stool softener and a stimulant. It helps breakdown hard faeces. It may cause abdominal cramps. It is available as liquid, capsules and enemas. There is a paediatric solution (12.5 mg/5 ml), and an adult solution (50mg/5ml). If the child dislikes its taste, the adult liquid may be used in older children to be able to give smaller volume.

Movicol paediatric - is a solution to be made from the sachet powder. It is well tolerated. This comes in various flavours. It is very useful in initial evacuation, and as continued treatment.

Treatment

There are generally accepted principles of management, though the dosages and choice of laxatives used may vary a lot. In the majority of patients, the main lines of management involve:

- **Adequate assessment and explanations** will be given before all treatment
- **Bowel clear out**—In the vast majority, it is possible and preferable to achieve bowel clear out using orally administered laxatives.
- **Evacuation**—Movicol paediatric or docusate and Picosulfate are frequently used to achieve. Hard impacted faecal masses may need to be softened first for 1-2 weeks before evacuation.
- **Enemas**—could also be given however these often distress the child and parents and are rarely required. In children with faecal soiling, laxatives may initially worsen the soiling problem, usually during the first two weeks. This means that they are working.
- **Maintenance of regular bowel habit** to prevent re-accumulation of faeces.
- Gradually **withdrawal of laxatives** as the patients improving dietary measures.

- The hardest part of management, is maintenance of regular bowel movements and prevention of re-accumulation of faeces. This often requires regular use of one or more laxatives.
- In addition, weekend courses of Picosulfate liquid may be required.
- Success requires high motivation by the patient, hard work by the parents and regular follow up.
- Uninterrupted regular laxative courses, improving fluid, fibre, fruit and vegetable intake, and daily toileting are essential parts of management.

Keeping a diary, particularly during the first few months of management often helps in long term monitoring and assessing the progress made. You could also link treatment to a reward scheme for achievable targets.

How long will treatment take?

Children with acute constipation and those under the age of one, may only need to improve their fluid and fibre intake.

Some children may need laxatives for a few weeks.

In older children with chronic constipation, the length of treatment depends on the previous course of illness.

The presence of soiling suggests a long course of illness and therefore will take a longer duration of treatment, often for several months. Overall a quarter of children with chronic constipation may be able to discontinue laxatives by 6 months, 50% by one year and 75% of patients by 2 years. Therefore, a quarter of patients may still require treatment for longer than 2 years.

It is often very difficult to know exactly when to stop laxatives. A simple and reasonable approach is 6 monthly trials.

Provided that the child has adequate fluid and fibre intake, no more soiling for 4-6 months and has a fairly regular bowel habit without pain, laxatives may be discontinued gradually.

Laxatives

Many of the laxatives are minimally or not absorbed and therefore, are less toxic than many other medications. There are various types of laxatives.

They work on the stool (poo) and/or the large bowel, meaning the amount required may be different from one child to another.

They are generally well tolerated and have only minimal side effects, including abdominal cramps and bloating and wind.

There is no convincing evidence that patients become dependent on laxatives, or that their effect in the individual patient wears off with time.

All laxatives, especially bulk-forming laxatives such as bran and ispaghula, require good fluid intake for optimum effect and to reduce their side effects.