

Constipation in children

Constipation in babies and children is quite common. About one in three British parents report constipation at some time in their child's life. Poor diet, fear about using the toilet and poor toilet training can all play a role.

Symptoms and signs to look out for:

As well as infrequent or irregular bowel movements, a child with constipation may also have the following signs and symptoms:

- Loss of appetite
- Lack of energy
- Being irritable, angry or unhappy
- Foul-smelling wind and stools
- Abdominal pain and discomfort
- Soiling their clothes
- Generally feeling unwell.

Causes

Poor diet

Children who are over-fed are more likely to have constipation, as are those who do not get enough fluids. Babies who have too much milk are also more likely to get constipation. As with adults, it is very important that your child has enough fibre in their diet.

Toilet training

Make sure that you do not make your child feel stressed or pressured about using the toilet. It is also important to let your children try things by themselves (when appropriate). Constantly intervening when they are using the toilet may make them feel anxious.

Toilet habits

Some children can feel stressed or anxious about using the toilet. They may have a phobia about using the toilet or feel they are unable to use the toilets at school.

This fear or phobia may be the result of your child experiencing pain when passing stools. This can lead to poor bowel habits, where children ignore the urge to pass stools and instead withhold them for fear of experiencing pain and discomfort. However, this will mean that their condition only worsens.

Other conditions

In rare cases, constipation in babies and children can be a sign of an underlying condition. Please liaise with your GP who will be able to offer you further advice and support on this.

Treatment of childhood constipation

Having a healthy, regular bowel means that your child is more likely to have a normal, stress-free, happy life. To reduce the chance of constipation and to have a healthy bowel, your child should:

- Drink plenty of fluid, especially water (see table below for a fluid requirements for age)
- Increase fibre in the diet (please see below for foods which are high in fibre)
- Exercise regularly, eg walk to school, swimming, etc
- Allow sufficient time for regular toileting
- Have access to clean and pleasant toilet facilities.

Fluid requirements

From around six months of age children start to obtain some fluid in the food they eat. Children should be encouraged to aim for the following volumes of liquid a day

Age	Fluid from drinks/day (water, juices and milk)
7–12 months	600ml
1–3 years	900ml
4–8 years	1200ml
Boys 9–13 years	1800ml
Girls 9–13 years	1600ml
Boys 14–18 years	2600ml
Girls 14–18 years	1800ml

High fibre foods

Fibre helps prevent constipation. The following foods are good sources of fibre.

Starchy carbohydrates

- Breakfast cereals such as: weetabix, shreddies, shredded wheat, bran flakes, porridge.
To increase the fibre content further you could add fruit (fresh or dried), eg raisins, banana
- Wholemeal bread
- Wholemeal pasta
- Brown rice.

Fruit and vegetables – aim for a minimum of 5 a day

- Fresh, frozen or dried. Ensure they have been washed and leave the skin on where possible
- Replace snacks of crisps or sweets with fruit or vegetables
- Include vegetables at all main meals.

Pulses

- Baked beans
- Peas
- Kidney beans
- Dahl.

Biscuits

- Digestive and fruit biscuits are higher in fibre than plain biscuits
- Try hobnobs, oatcakes and wholemeal crackers (eg Ryvita).