

Constipation in Children

Fibre and fluid for healthy bowels

Fibre and fluid help to prevent constipation and give children the best chance of having a comfortable, regular bowel habit. Normal bowel habits vary widely with age. Constipation usually means the passage of hard, infrequent stools, often large but sometimes small and pebble like. Talk to your GP or Plunket Nurse if you think your child may be constipated.

Preventing constipation

How much fibre does a child need?

Fibre is only found in plant foods. These include breads, cereals, fruit, vegetables and cooked dried peas, beans and lentils.

Preschoolers need to eat ...

At least TWO servings for vegetables and TWO servings of fruit every day and

At least FOUR servings of breads and cereals

School children need to eat ...

At least THREE servings of vegetables and TWO servings of fruit every day and

At least FIVE servings of breads and cereals, older children need at least SIX servings.

Examples of one serving

Fruit and vegetables

1 medium potato

½ cup cooked vegetables

½ cup salad or 1 tomato

1 or 2 small fresh fruit

½ cup canned or stewed fruit

Breads and cereals

1 roll, 1 muffin or 1 slice of bread

½ - 1 cup of breakfast cereal

1 cup cooked rice or pasta

Encourage fruit, vegetables, breads and cereals

- Offer a raw vegetable platter at dinnertime if cooked vegetables are frowned upon.
- Offer vegetables in stir-fries or as part of a dish e.g. spaghetti bolognese with grated carrot in the sauce.

This information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor or individual consultation with a Registered Dietitian. This information may only be used in its entirety.

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- Baked beans are a great source of fibre! Beans and lentils can be added into casseroles or soups. Alternatively try nachos or tacos for dinner.
- For a change try frozen fruit as a natural ice block (orange or mandarin segments, grapes, peach slices or bananas).
- Fruit milkshakes or fruit crumbles in winter are always popular.
- Add fruit to biscuits, scones, cakes or muffins.
- Dried fruits are high in fibre – have them with a meal rather than as snacks as they are high in sugar, so not kind to teeth.
- Start the day with a high fibre breakfast cereal – weetbix and porridge are easy, healthy choices.
- Some children won't eat "bread-with-bits-in-it" so use a high fibre white bread. When cooking, substitute some wholemeal flour for white flour.
- Use wholemeal bread to make breadcrumbs or as toppings.

Increase fibre from a variety of foods rather than giving bran.

Keep offering drinks as children may forget to drink when they are busy. Water is best – it's cheap and easy to get. Keep a jug of cold water in the fridge.

Encourage your child to be physically active.

Managing constipation

Why do some children become constipated?

- Poor fluid intake
- Not enough fibre
- Drinking a lot of milk – it's not the milk that causes constipation but filling up on milk can lead to no appetite for other foods, which provide fibre
- Food intolerance
- Ignoring the need to go to the toilet or a fear of using a strange toilet, which results in the child "holding on"
- Immobility caused through illness
- Some medications – check with your GP

Constipation is rarely seen in breastfed babies. Weaning, the introduction of solids, and the toddler period are times when constipation can develop.

For babies over 3 months

- The most common cause of constipation is not enough fluids. Usually extra fluids are all that is needed.
- If your baby drinks formula, check that you are mixing it as directed. If the formula is too concentrated your baby may not be getting enough fluids.
- Try offering cooled boiled water twice a day, as well as usual feeds.
- Offer 5ml pure orange or apple juice with 50ml cooled, boiled water once or twice a day until the bowel motions are soft, as well as normal feeds.

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From six months when your baby is eating food try offering

- Fruit (e.g. peaches (4-6 months), plums (6-7 months), kiwifruit (8-9 months), prunes (from 9 months))
- Vegetables
- Cereals
- Fluids
- Give your baby lots of floor time to encourage movement

Children over 1 year

Encourage

- Plenty of fluids
- Fruit, vegetables and cereals (see ideas above)
- Milk in healthy amounts – about 2 glasses each day
- Active movement through play and dance
- Regular meal and snack times
- Regular toilet times. Encourage your child to sit on the toilet or potty after meals – the usual time for some movement! A reward system often has good results. A toilet bowl can be an imposing sight so a footrest or telephone books make the job a lot easier.

Mild constipation will usually respond to more fluids, especially water, a little more dietary fibre and regular toileting times. Talk to your GP or Plunket Nurse if the constipation doesn't improve with these suggestions.

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