

Health Tips for Parents

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How can I help my child with constipation?

Constipation is a common problem in children characterized by infrequent, painful or hard-to-pass stools. Parents should contact a doctor if the condition lasts more than two weeks or affects the child's daily activities.



Several factors may cause children to become constipated, most of which are not dangerous. These may include a diet that is low in fiber or liquids, a lack of exercise and stress from a change of school or new routine, says Elaheh Vahabnezhad, MD, a pediatric gastroenterologist at UCLA's 12th Street office in Santa Monica.



When constipation is a problem Another common cause of constipation is "withholding," a behavior in which children postpone stooling or stop themselves from having bowel movements. Many children avoid toileting because they are busy with other activities or reluctant to use unfamiliar toilets. Some children start withholding after a painful episode of constipation. Withholding behaviors, however they start,

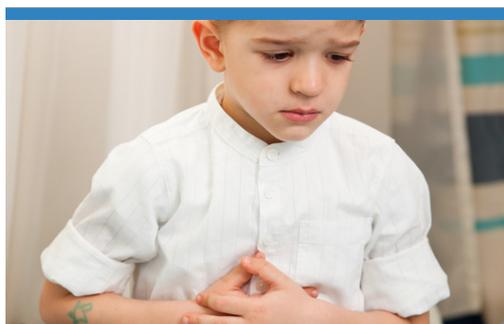
can cause a cycle of constipation that is difficult to break.

Once a child has been constipated for more than a few days, retained stool can fill up the large intestine, causing it to stretch. When stool enters the rectum and isn't eliminated right away, it becomes hard, dry and painful to pass, which may make the child more likely to avoid the toilet. Children in a cycle of withholding may experience severe abdominal pain and soiling, in which liquid stool resembling diarrhea leaks out of the child's rectum.

Treating constipation Most constipation can be eliminated with exercise and dietary changes such as incorporating more fiber and water into the child's diet. Exercise, especially about 15 minutes after a meal, also helps stimulate bowel movements. Over-the-counter stool softeners can help soften stools and make them easier to pass.

Signs and symptoms of constipation in children include:

- Two bowel movements or fewer in a two-week period
- Bowel movements that are hard, pebbly and difficult to pass
- Abdominal pain or pain during bowel movements
- Large stools that clog the toilet
- Poor appetite and crankiness
- Bleeding from the anus caused by passing hard stool



When to see a doctor

Constipation in children is not usually serious. Chronic constipation, however, may lead to complications or in rare cases signal an underlying condition. If your child soils him or herself by passing stool anywhere other than the toilet, your child may suffer from chronic constipation, and should be evaluated by a doctor and may require treatments.

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood. In addition to our Children's Health Center in Westwood, we have offices in Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional.