Constipation - when you just can't go!

Kids' Health Topic

Constipation is when you don't pass poo as often as is normal for your body, and when the poo is harder than usual.

How often should you go?

That depends on your body. What is normal for one person may not be for another.

- Some people normally do a poo every two or three days (or sometimes even less often).
- Some people may do a poo more than once a day.

You get to know what your regular routine is. If you are doing poo less often than normal you might soon start to feel uncomfortable.

What is constipation?

The food that we eat and drink is the fuel which powers our bodies. You can learn more about this if you read our topics ‘Fuel for your body’ and ‘The digestive system - powering up your body’.

When your body has taken all the stuff it needs out of the food, the rest goes down into the large bowel and collects in the rectum. The poo in your rectum has fibre and water in it and a whole lot of other waste (such as bacteria from the large bowel).

When there is poo in the rectum you feel like you want to ‘do a poo’, so off you go to the toilet. (See our topic Your waste disposal system.)

But, sometimes you find that you just can’t ‘go’!

You may try really hard but the poo just stays right there. Or if it comes out it might really hurt because it is too hard and too big to get out easily.

We call it constipation when:

- it is harder than usual to do a poo
- the poo is harder than usual
- someone is passing poo less than 3 times a week, unless this is normal for them.

You might also have cramping pains in the tummy or feel all blown up inside.

What causes it?

There are lots of things which can cause constipation.

- Not having enough drinks, especially water.
- Not getting enough fibre in your diet.
- Hanging on and not going to the toilet when your rectum sends you a message that you need to go.
- Sitting for a long time.
- Travelling for a long time like on a plane or in the car.
> Not exercising enough.
> Not eating enough healthy food.
> Taking some medicines.
> Being unwell.

Some people get too interested in what they are doing, and don’t take notice when they get that feeling that they should go. Others don’t want to use some toilets, like not wanting to use school toilets because they are not nice or they may feel like unsafe places.

Sometimes you may be doing all the right things and still get constipated. Some people get constipated really easily while others very rarely have that problem.

What is fibre?

Fibre is part of your food which your body cannot digest. There is a lot of fibre in foods like fruit, vegetables, some cereals (not the ones with lots of sugar in them) and in wholemeal or whole grain bread. There is no fibre in foods such as milk, cheese and lollies. Milk and cheese are good for you in other ways, but lollies are not.

**Fibre helps keep poo soft.**

What can happen

Being constipated can be uncomfortable and even painful.

Passing a large, hard poo can hurt and even tear the lining of the anus, making it bleed.

There is no truth in the myth that poisons can get into your body from your bowel if you get constipated. Being constipated cannot make you sick.

What you can do

If you are not usually constipated then be a detective looking for the clues about what has been happening in your life to cause it.

> Maybe you have been travelling or sitting around too much and now you need to get more exercise.
> Maybe you have been sick, so try to start eating healthy foods again.
> Maybe you have been eating too many 'sometimes' foods and you need to eat more fruit, vegetables and cereals.
> Maybe you have not been drinking enough water.

Mum, dad or whoever cares for you may give you some special medicine which will help to soften the poo so that it won’t hurt when you pass it out of your body. It is best to use those which increase fibre in the gut. Your carer may ask the pharmacist or doctor which ones would be best for you.

> Sometimes you might have to use a sort of ‘jellybean’ thing called a suppository which is put into the rectum through the anus. This will soften the poo so that the rectum can push the poo out and it does not hurt when the poo comes out. It can feel a bit strange and a bit ‘fizzy’.
Sometimes it can help to massage your tummy. Lie on your back and start at the bottom right side of your tummy and move up and around to the bottom left side of your tummy. This is the direction that the poo travels. Press quite hard. Maybe you can get mum or dad to do this.

If you are often constipated it would be a good idea to see your doctor.

Soiling

Sometimes when a kid is very constipated some runny poo can leak out around the hard lump of poo onto the kid's underpants. This is called soiling.

Soiling is not done on purpose and usually happens without the kid knowing. It is not the kid's fault.

Sometimes people think it is laziness but it is not.

Sometimes kids who soil have other behaviour problems which tend to go when the soiling gets better.

Sometimes where soiling has gone on for a long time, both parents and kids can get frustrated and upset with each other as they try to fix the problem.

Soiling is embarrassing for kids. They often get teased and sometimes don't have friends if it happens at school. Family members also are often unkind.

Soiling needs to be treated.

The most important thing to do when a kid is soiling is to work on making the poo softer so that the kid is not constipated. Sometimes the hard lump of poo needs help to come out first using a small amount of special fluid called an enema. This is put in through the anus.

Dr Kate says

If you have any blood on the toilet paper after a poo, or blood mixed in with the poo then tell whoever looks after you about it.

It is always a good idea to go and check things out with your doctor if you are worried about something that is happening with your body.

We could have used other words for poo like faeces (say fee-sees), bowel motions or stools but most kids we asked thought that poo was a word everyone knew about and used.