

# HEALTHY BEGINNINGS

## CONSTIPATION IN CHILDREN SIX MONTHS TO SIX YEARS

Bowel habits in older babies and children can worry parents. There is wide variation of what is a normal bowel movement. Constipation is when hard bowel movements are:

- Infrequent or less often than usual
- Dry and difficult or painful to pass
- Incomplete
- Unusually large

Bowel movement frequency can vary from child to child. Some have bowel movements more than once a day while others have one every other day. Breastfed babies can have bowel movements after every feed; others go 7-10 days between bowel movements.

Constipation can cause stomach pain, bloating, gas, poor appetite, crankiness and blood in the stool. If you think your child is constipated, talk to their health care provider.

Solid foods can make bowel movements:

- Thicker or firmer
- Change colour
- Have a stronger odour
- Have small pieces of undigested food

### CAUSES OF CONSTIPATION

- Not eating enough dietary fibre
- Not getting enough fluids
- Not getting enough physical activity
- “Holding in” bowel movements or not using the bathroom when your child has the urge

### PUBLIC HEALTH

1-877-464-9675  
TTY 1-866-512-6228  
[york.ca/feedingkids](http://york.ca/feedingkids)

### Dietary Fibre

Getting enough fibre can help to prevent constipation but fibre supplements or extra fibre are not recommended to treat constipation.

To help your child get enough fibre, include:

- Vegetables and fruit
- Whole grain products
- Legumes (beans, lentils)

Read the percent daily value (% DV) on the Nutrition Facts Table to help compare or know if the fibre in a serving of a product or food is:

- A source - has at least 5% DV
- A good source - has at least 15% DV
- An excellent source - has at least 25% DV

Tips to help your child get enough fibre:

- In Canada, products labelled “100% whole wheat” are not whole grain. Look instead for the words “whole grain whole wheat”
- For other grains, look for the word “whole” in front of the grain (“whole oat, whole rye”)
- Add berries to plain yogurt or oatmeal
- Choose whole fruit instead of fruit juice
- Add beans or lentils to soup or spaghetti sauce

### Fluids

If your child is drinking enough fluids for their age and activity level, giving extra fluids is not recommended to treat constipation.

You will know your child is getting enough fluids if the colour of their urine is pale yellow to clear. If they are in diapers, expect at least six wet diapers per day.

Offer water with or between meals without pressure. If your child is over one year of age and is not breastfeeding, offer two cups (500 mL) of milk per day. Too much milk can lower the appetite for healthy foods or make constipation worse.

100% juices such as prune, apple or pear are high in sorbitol and may help constipation. Limit juice to no more than 120 mL (4 oz) per day.

## Physical activity

Daily physical activity is recommended whether or not your child has constipation.

Recommendations for daily physical activity:

- Less than one year of age – several times, include interactive floor-based play
- 1 to 4 years of age – at least 180 minutes at any intensity throughout the day
- 5 to 11 years of age – at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity

Here are some fun ideas:

- Crawl, run, dance or play tag together
- Go sledding or build a snowman in the winter
- Visit the local park or an indoor play centre

## “Holding in”

“Holding in” is when a child tightens the buttocks muscles so the stool is pushed back and the urge to “go” goes away.

As the stool sits, it gets harder, drier and more difficult to pass. Leaking (overflow around the stool) can confuse a child and anger parents. Remember that leaking is not being done on purpose.

A child may “hold in” because they:

- Fear of using the toilet
- Fear of having a painful bowel movement
- Having a crack or tear around the anus
- Being pressured to learn to use the toilet

“Holding in” behaviours include:

- Squatting or rocking
- Stiff walking on tiptoes
- Crossing the legs or sitting with heels pressed against the perineum

## Tips for successful toileting

- Set up a daily toilet routine
- Allow your child to sit on the toilet for three to 10 minutes, 1-2 times a day
- Read to your child to help relax them
- Provide a toddler toilet seat with a stool or child “potty” that has firm foot support
- Choose clothes that easily pull up and down
- Be patient when your child is learning to use the toilet. Avoid punishment and rewards are not needed
- Do not use words like “dirty” or “stinky”
- Use proper terms to describe body parts and functions (e.g. urine, bowel movement)
- Keep a diary to show the health care provider if you think your child is constipated

### Seek medical attention if:

- Stools are bloody or black
- You think your child is impacted (the stool is hard and large and can no longer pass)
- Stools are loose, watery, or full of mucus
- Your child is often constipated or has constipation lasting eight weeks or more

Do not give your child laxatives, enemas, suppositories, medications or herbal supplements without talking to your child’s health care provider.

Prebiotics and probiotics are not recommended to treat constipation.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information and additional nutrition resources, visit [york.ca/feedingkids](http://york.ca/feedingkids) or [unlockfood.ca](http://unlockfood.ca)

To speak to a registered dietitian at no cost, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

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