

## **Kid Constipation: Clean Diaper – Big Problem**

*By: Deborah Abrams Kaplan*

There's only one topic slightly less disgusting for parents than poopy diapers. And that is the LACK of poopy diapers, also known as constipation.

It's a popular topic for good reason. Constipation occurs in 17 percent of kids ages one to three. And it's the main complaint in three to five percent of all general pediatric visits, and the primary issue in 25 percent of pediatric gastroenterology consultations, according to the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition.

While this article is based on medical research, discussions with physicians and personal experience (my daughter), see your pediatrician if you think your child is constipated. A rectal examination can confirm the diagnosis.

### **What is it?**

Constipation is most often a functional problem, meaning doctors can't find anything wrong with the colon, but know it's not working properly.

For other kids, a painful poop starts a cycle of fear and withholding, making it a psychological issue. Constipation can be a vicious cycle when after a painful poop, she decides not to let *that* happen again. She willfully holds it in, making it even more painful when it's finally released. For this reason, parents should treat constipation before the child associates pooping with pain, making toilet training even more difficult.

Kids are most susceptible to constipation during transitional times - when introducing cereal and solid foods as infants, when toilet training, and when starting school, according to Dr. C. Di Lorenzo of Gastroenterology Clinics of North America.

The common definition is that constipation involves infrequent or hard, painful bowel movements. But constipation can also be a change in the frequency and stool consistency of the usual bowel movement pattern, according to Elizabeth Able, PhD.

Surprisingly, there's no understood medical cause for most pediatric constipation cases. While doctors recommend increasing the amount of fiber that these kids eat, they don't, on average, eat less fiber than their peers.

So what to do?

Some cases are solved by increasing fiber and fluid intake, but that alone won't work for all kids. After weeks, if not months of constipation, the sensation to poop may be gone, or the rectum might have lost the tone it needs to properly push stool out.

## **Treatment**

While controversial, some doctors recommend an enema to clean out the rectum before starting treatment. We used a pediatric Fleet enema, though some other physicians recommend inserting a Q-tip or even a small piece of glycerin soap into the rectum to stimulate a bowel movement. While the enema was awkward to give and not much fun for my daughter or me, I was shocked how much she had inside when the enema quickly took effect. To say I felt badly for not taking her to the doctor sooner is an understatement.

The next step might be an over-the-counter laxative or stool softener. Milk of Magnesia is a laxative which stimulates bowel movements. Stool softeners, like mineral oil or Colase, can be swallowed daily to keep the stool lubricated and soft, making passage easier.

Others swear by Acidophilus, a bacteria which helps maintain intestinal health. It comes in powder or tablet form in health food stores, including Whole Foods. It worked for my daughter for two days, but others have had longer term success.

If these don't work, try MiraLax, a tasteless, laxative powder you mix with a beverage (like juice or water). While originally prescription, it's now sold over-the-counter. Several physicians told me they love MiraLax because it has no side effects and it's safe for kids. MiraLax works by drawing water into the stool, so it passes easily. Ideally the child can be weaned off MiraLax within a few months to have normal (unassisted) poops. At least that's how it worked for my daughter.

Constipation is not cured quickly. If your child has had weeks or months of blockage, you can't expect her system to regain function in a few days. The child might need six months of treatment until the muscles regain their tone.

If after treatment the constipation isn't relieved, you'll need to consider other causes, such as food allergies or a long list of rare medical problems. Consider keeping a log and eliminating categories of food, one at a time, like dairy, wheat and gluten. Doctors can test for medical problems.

## **Dietary Changes**

Some foods like bananas, rice, cheese and milk are thought to contribute to constipation. Try eliminating them one at a time to see if it makes a difference.

Before and during treatment, increase the fiber and fluids in your child's diet. Kids over age two need their age plus five to seven grams of fiber daily (i.e. a two year old needs 7-9 grams a day). Tasty cereals like Quaker Oat Squares, Cracklin' Oat Bran, Barbara's Shredded Oats, and even Grape Nuts have five grams of fiber per adult serving. Cheerios has three grams, as does a package of instant oatmeal.

Other easy ways to increase fiber are to switch to whole wheat pasta, bread and tortillas. Use brown rice instead of white. Throw some oat bran (available in the cereal section)

into pasta sauce, lasagna, smoothies, sandwiches, pudding etc. Make oatmeal cookies, adding extra oats, oat bran and a few chocolate chips. These high fiber cookies are a special treat in my household - even my husband loves them.

My daughter was never a big fruit eater, so I bought colorful sprinkles that she can only use on fruits like apples, pears and applesauce. She devours the fruit now, sometimes even without sprinkles. One raw pear has 5 grams of fiber. An apple with skin has 3 grams. For me, the teaspoon or two of processed sugar is a small price to pay for that.

Your kid is not a big water drinker? Consider changing the beverage. How about adding popsicles or watered-down juice? Try a counting game, where you see how much water he can drink before you count to ten. He'll learn numbers and get fluids at the same time.

Eating healthful foods is hard enough, but making a small child do it can be a challenge even in the best of circumstances. Be creative. Be informed. And if your child is constipated, stay on top of the situation.

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For more information:

[www.aboutkidsgi.org/fiber.html](http://www.aboutkidsgi.org/fiber.html) - for the fiber content in certain foods:

[www.drspock.com](http://www.drspock.com)

[www.babycenter.com](http://www.babycenter.com)

[www.miralax.com](http://www.miralax.com)