

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: CONSTIPATION



What is constipation?

Constipation can happen even if a child has a bowel movement (BM, stool or poop) every day. You might feel a little embarrassed about this, but constipation happens to most children at some point. The good news is that constipation is rarely caused by a serious illness.

By the time you notice symptoms, constipation has usually been a problem for a while, and may take months to get better. Having a large amount of stool in the bowels causes them to become larger than normal, making it harder for the bowel muscles to empty stool. The bowel will get back to a more normal size if stool doesn't build up over the next 3-6 months.

Constipation means that stool is:

- hard or painful to pass
- very large (sometimes needing a plunger to flush)
- type 1, 2 or 3 on the Bristol stool chart

A child or youth with constipation may:

- suffer with stomach pain or cramps (these can be severe)
- have trouble passing urine (going pee) or need to pass urine more often
- have blood in their stool
- have problems with behaviour
- leak stool into their underwear
- avoid going to the toilet

How does constipation happen?

- not eating enough fibre, vegetables, fruits, and grains
- not getting enough physical activity
- some medications (antacids, opiate pain medications, anti-depressants)
- holding in stool ('withholding') when they are feeling stressed about potty training, are too busy playing or are embarrassed/afraid of about using a school or public toilet
- delaying going to the toilet when feeling the urge to 'poop'

Bristol stool chart

Looks like	Description
	Type 1: separate hard lumps like nuts (hard to pass)
	Type 2: sausage-shaped but lumpy
	Type 3: like a sausage but with cracks on its surface
	Type 4: ideal consistency, like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
	Type 5: soft blobs with clear-cut edges (passed easily)
	Type 6: Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool
	Type 7: watery, no solid pieces, entirely liquid

Withholding causes stool to become hard, dry, and difficult to pass. This sometimes causes a large mass of impacted stool in the rectum (the part of the bowel that holds stool). Stool builds up behind the impaction and may leak, soiling a child's underwear.

Other things you can do at home to help

Give a healthy diet

Vegetables, fruits and grains are good sources of fibre. The amount of fibre needed each day depends on your child's age. See Canada's Food Guide for the number of servings of vegetables, fruits and grains your child should have each day. Each meal and snack should include a fibre rich food. Increase fibre in your child's diet gradually.



Make sure to increase fluids at the same time.

Increase fluids

- A 22 lb child needs 1 litre (4 cups) each day.
- A 44 lb child needs 1.5 litres (6 cups) each day.
- A 99 lb child needs 2 litres (8 cups) each day.



Toddlers should have just 2-3 cups of milk each day. The rest of their fluid intake should be water. Limit juice, as it can cause cramping and gas.

Regular toileting

It can take weeks or months to train the bowel back to a normal pattern. Take advantage of the body's normal urge to empty after meals. 20-30 minutes after each meal at home, have your child sit on the toilet or potty for one minute for each year of age (for example, three minutes for a three-year-old).



Give your child a foot stool if needed. This will make your child more comfortable and give them some support to let go of a bowel movement. Join your child to read a book together or chat and catch up! Younger children may like stickers on a chart for sitting on the toilet after each meal.

Keep a diary of:

- how often your child has a bowel movement
- the type of stool your child has (check the Bristol Stool chart and record the stool type)

More physical activity

Regular physical activity helps stimulate normal bowel function and keeps the bowel healthy. Children need at least one hour of moderate physical activity each day. For more information, check out Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Living.



Contact your health-care provider if your child or youth:

- has severe pain or pain lasting longer than 30 minutes
- gets a fever
- has vomiting
- loses weight
- wakes up from sleep to pass stool
- keeps crying and you can't soothe them
- develops cracks in the skin around the anus (anal fissure)
- has intestine drooping out the anus (rectal prolapse)
- is still constipated (stool type 1-3 on the stool chart) after two weeks following the above plan