

Constipation in children

This leaflet offers more information about constipation in children. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.

What is constipation and why has my child got it?

How often toddlers and children normally poo can range from three times a day to once every three to four days, as every child is different.

Constipation means not pooing often enough or passing hard, dry poo which may be lumpy, pellet-like, large or small.

Constipation in children is a common problem.

Some things make constipation more likely, for example:

- not eating enough fibre
- not drinking enough water
- a change in lifestyle or routine
- toilet training
- side effects of certain medicines e.g. iron tablets
- ignoring the urge to poo
- pain on pooing, causing the child to hold on to their poo
- anxiety or low mood.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Children with constipation will struggle to pass their poo, which may be painful and/or cause bleeding from the back passage.

They may have tummy pain and go off their food.

Some children will start 'soiling' which means they pass loose poo, often without realising, into their pants or the toilet.

Does my child need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?

Diagnosis is usually made from the information you tell your doctor and from examination, without the need for tests.

What treatments are available?

Treatment for constipation and soiling has three phases:

1. disimpaction, or clean out
2. maintenance
3. re-establishing good toileting behaviours.

Laxatives (medicines given by mouth for constipation) are normally used and your doctor will tell you when and how your child should take them.

There are different types of laxative but they all work by either making the stool soft and/or stimulating the bowel to push it out.

This treatment can make tummy pain and soiling worse at first, but it will settle down after about a week.

Enemas or suppositories, given up the back passage are sometimes used if laxatives are not successful.

It is very important for your child to continue to take their medicines until the bowel gets back into a healthy shape. Most children need medicines for at least 6 months, which is perfectly safe. Their constipation will have taken time to develop and will take time to treat - it may come back if treatment is stopped too soon or too quickly.

You will also need to encourage your child to re-learn healthy toileting behaviour, which will also take time.

What happens if my child does not get treatment?

Sometimes constipation gets better on its own with a healthy diet and lifestyle.

More often, it gets worse and leads to other problems e.g. tummy pain and decreased appetite and eating, which can affect your child's growth and development.

Is there anything I can do to help my child?

You should encourage your child to eat more fibre-rich food e.g. fruit, vegetables and cereals and to drink more fluids and water. Don't offer your child too much milk though, as this can make their constipation worse.

You should also make sure your child has regular exercise in a way that they enjoy.

Let your child have at least 10 minutes on the toilet every day to make sure they have passed as much poo as possible and reward their efforts, not the results! Give them small rewards for trying e.g. stickers (not sweets) whether they manage to poo or not.

Do not punish your child for soiling - they can't help it.

Useful sources of information

The following websites have useful information:

<http://www.eric.org.uk/Constipation>

<http://www.patient.co.uk/health/constipation-in-children-leaflet>

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about constipation in children, please contact the paediatric medicine secretaries on 020 8725 3648 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4.30pm), giving the name of the doctor you saw, if possible. Out of hours, please leave a voice message.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

