



VICTORIAN CONTINENCE RESOURCE CENTRE



# Tip sheet: Constipation

## Constipation is a common childhood problem.

The condition can refer to any of the following:

- less than three poos per week
- large poo – really wide or extremely long
- hard poo – rabbit droppings or large dried poo
- difficult to pass (gets stuck)
- pain when doing a poo – your child may make a straining sound or pull faces
- lots of little bits of poo over the day and may have a more offensive smell.

A child who is constipated may have poor appetite and may complain of tummy pains. Some children avoid doing poo by clenching their bottom and standing on tip toes.

If your child has any of these symptoms see your doctor. Constipation, if left untreated, can overstretch the bowel, making the constipation worse. For some children this can lead to losing the feeling of needing to go to the toilet for poo. As a result they may soil their underwear as poo leaks out from the overstretched bowel.

The passage of large or hardened poo can cause tears in and around your child's bottom. These tears may bleed and cause pain or discomfort. Some children try to hold on to poo to avoid the pain of passing large or hardened poo; this can make the constipation worse. We recommend you see your doctor for advice on the management of the constipation and tears.

### Causes of constipation

The cause of constipation is not always clear but may be due to one or more of the following:

- holding off doing a 'poo' when they feel the need because:
  - too distracted by playing
  - fear of the toilet
  - fear of the poo hurting
  - sensory issues
  - toilet room cold and uninviting
- does not like the feeling when passing poo
- not sitting on the toilet long enough to completely empty the bowel

- not drinking enough
- a diet low in fruit and vegetables
- limited mobility
- low muscle tone
- poor body awareness
- the aftermath of an acute illness
- the effect of medications
- change of routine (diet, no accessible toilet, toilet training).

### What to do

See your doctor for advice on treatment of constipation. The doctor may prescribe a laxative to help empty the bowel and to help with establishing a regular poo pattern. Do not use laxatives without advice from your doctor.

Keep a record of how often your child does a poo and what it looks like before you see the doctor. You can use a calendar or diary or you may wish to use the *Wee & poo: daily recording sheet* on page 24 of the booklet. The *Bristol stool chart for children* on page 25 will help you with the description. Take the record with you as this will help in deciding on the treatment.

### Diet and fluids

- Diet alone is unlikely to be able to treat constipation but is essential in maintaining good bowel habits. A varied diet should be encouraged – fruit and vegetables should be apart of the daily intake.
- Appetite usually picks up once your child has a regular routine for passing poo. Start reintroducing foods so your child is eating a varied diet.
- If fibre is being increased, fluids need to be increased too. Fibre without enough fluid can worsen constipation and soiling.
- If your child is very constipated increasing fibre may make the soiling worse because it will increase the amount of poo in an already overloaded system.
- Have drinks spaced regularly over the day.
- Large amounts of milk can contribute to constipation and lowered appetite.

The tip sheet *Food, fluids and fun!* gives more information on diet and fluids.

## Toileting routine

- Your child needs to feel safe and relaxed when using the toilet. The tip sheet *The toilet area* gives more information.
- Correct sitting posture and technique to help your child pass poo. See the tip sheet *The toilet position*.
- Establish a sitting routine on the toilet at the same time each day. The best time is about twenty minutes after breakfast or the main meal of the day. Try this for a week. Introduce a second 'sit' if there is no poo the first time.
- A sitting routine should be for no longer than five minutes, three times a day.
- NEVER force your child to sit on the toilet. If sitting is a problem start with a short period of time and then slowly extend the time. Page 13 in the booklet gives more information about a sitting program.

Remember to reward your child for their co-operation and when poo is passed into the toilet.

The tip sheet *Won't sit to poo* gives more ideas on establishing toileting routines. Information about rewards can be found on page 13 of the booklet.