

Dietetics

Constipation and your child's diet

This leaflet should be read alongside the advice available on this website: www.eric.org.uk/advice-for-children-with-constipation/

What is constipation?

A 'normal' toilet routine is when your child passes a soft, formed stool up to 3 times per day, with no more than 3 days between bowel movements.

Constipation happens when stools becomes hard and difficult to pass, and it often occurs less often. This is a common problem for children. Sometimes, children may hold in their poo if they have had pain or discomfort before, which can make the problem worse.

What can help?

Research shows that certain things can affect the consistency of poo, making it harder and possibly painful to pass. These include:

- 1) Eating enough fibre. This helps make poo bulkier and easier to pass.
- 2) Drinking 6-8 glasses of fluid. This helps to soften a poo.
- 3) Exercise and moving your body regularly. This helps get the digestive muscles working, turning food into poo.

Fibre

Fibre, also called roughage, is the part of plant foods that our bodies can't digest.

Fibre is important for keeping the bowel healthy. It acts like a sponge,



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holding in water and helping make poo soft and easy to pass.

There are 2 main types of fibre, **soluble** and **insoluble**.

- Soluble fibre is found in foods like oats, the inside of fruits and vegetables, beans and pulses.
- Insoluble fibre is found in foods like wholemeal bread, wheat-based cereals, and the skins and seeds of fruits and vegetables.

It is important to include both types of fibre in your child's diet.

Note:

- Fibre should be increased slowly over a number of weeks, as a sudden increase may make things worse.
- High-fibre foods can fill your child up quickly, which may make them eat less and could cause weight loss. This is especially important to watch for children under 5 years old. If you are worried they are losing weight, weigh them or get them weighed at your local health clinic or GP.

How to increase fibre (also see practical tips below):

Eat more of these	Eat less of these
<p>Bread and cereals</p> <p>Wholemeal, wholegrain and seeded bread (avoid seeded breads in younger children).</p> <p>Wholemeal naan, chapattis and pittas.</p> <p>Wholemeal flour.</p> <p>Wholemeal pasta and wholegrain/brown rice.</p> <p>Whole wheat/wholegrain cereals such as Weetabix, Wheat flakes, Bran cereals, Shredded Wheat,</p>	<p>Bread and cereals</p> <p>White bread.</p> <p>White naan, chapattis, pittas.</p> <p>White flour.</p> <p>White pasta and rice.</p> <p>Low-fibre cereals such as cornflakes and rice cereals.</p>

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<p>Shreddies, Fruit & Fibre, Oatibix, Granola, puffed wheat, muesli and porridge.</p> <p>Fruit and vegetables</p> <p>All fruit: fresh, dried, frozen and tinned varieties.</p> <p>All vegetables, especially peas, baked beans, red beans, black-eyed beans and lentils.</p> <p>Note: leave skins on where possible.</p> <p>Cakes and biscuits</p> <p>Wholemeal or oat biscuits, wholemeal crispbreads. Examples include digestives, oat cereal bars, biscuits, flapjacks, fig rolls.</p> <p>Cakes made with wholemeal flour.</p> <p>Snacks</p> <p>Nuts (avoid whole nuts for children under 5 years), seeds (avoid seeds for younger children), popcorn, fresh and dried fruit.</p>	<p>Cakes and biscuits</p> <p>Cakes and biscuits made with white flour, such as sweet plain biscuits and cream crackers.</p> <p>Snacks</p> <p>Sweets, chocolate and crisps.</p>
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Top tips for increasing fibre at home

Carbohydrates

- If your child does not like high-fibre cereals, try mixing them with lower-fibre cereals.
- If your child likes soft foods and has trouble with normal food textures, try soaking whole wheat cereals or porridge in milk to make them easier to eat.

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- Baked beans and other beans or pulses work well when added to stews, casseroles or soups.
- Hummus is a good snack. You can serve it with wholemeal pitta bread or use it as a dip for vegetables.

Fruit and vegetables

Try to give your child fruit and/or vegetables 5 times a day. Make sure the portion is right for the age of your child. For more information, visit www.nutrition.org.uk/media/oufg1pbd/5532-booklet-sept21.pdf or search for “5532 a day nutrition foundation” into your chosen search engine.

- You can mash or blend tinned or fresh fruit.
- Homemade or pre-prepared smoothies are a good option. Just be careful with pre-made smoothies as they can have added sugar, so it is important to read the label.
- Fruits such as apple can be stewed or cooked in the microwave.
- Dried fruits such as apricots, prunes and plums can be soaked, cooked and then mashed or blended.
- Add fruit to custard, yoghurt or milk puddings.
- You can add fruit to desserts like banana splits, tinned fruit with jelly, chocolate covered raisins or dried fruit like raisins and dates in cakes or biscuits.
- Try adding fruit to cereal and other meals to make them more appealing to your child.
- Root vegetables such as carrot, swede and parsnip can be mashed.
- Baked beans can be mashed or blended.
- Tinned tomatoes blend well into sauces and main meals.
- Lentils turn soft when well-cooked with plenty of liquid. Try making homemade vegetable or lentil soup.
- You can blend extra vegetables into tinned or packet soups.
- Add extra vegetables to casseroles, stews or bolognese. If your child is picky, chop the vegetables small or grate them.
- Encourage eating the skins of foods where possible, like on jacket potatoes.

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Fluids

Drinking enough fluids is important when your child is eating a higher-fibre diet to produce soft stools. Aim for at least **6-8 drinks a day**. It is best to offer drinks during or after meals, as drinking before meals may reduce their appetite.

From 5 years old, you can give your child undiluted fruit juice or smoothies. Limit this to no more than 1 glass (about 150 ml) a day and give it with meals to help reduce the risk of tooth decay.

If your child drinks large amounts of milk, it may increase the risk of constipation, as they may be drinking it instead of eating food. After 12 months, try to reduce milk intake to less than 1 pint per day (568ml).

Exercise

Encouraging your child to be physically active can help improve constipation and promote regular bowel habits.

It is recommended that children get active every day:

- **1-4 year olds:** 180 minutes (3 hours) of activity every day.
- **3-4 years:** At least 60 minutes of this should be moderate to vigorous activity.
- **5-18 years:** At least 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous activity a day.
- **Children and young people aged 5 to 18 with disabilities:** Aim for 20 minutes of physical activity each day. If needed, this can be split into smaller sessions. They should also do strength and balance activities 3 times a week.

For ideas of what counts as moderate or vigorous activity, see the following websites:

- www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-under-five-years/
- www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people/

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What's next: Medication

Your GP may prescribe medications to help with your child's constipation. The treatment will depend on your child's age.

Laxatives can help soften stools and make them easier to pass. Common types of laxatives are movicol and lactulose. These work by drawing water from the rest of the body into the bowel. They may take 2 or 3 days to start working.

More information

For more information on constipation and other toilet troubles, visit:

- ERIC: www.eric.org.uk/advice-for-children-with-constipation/
- Bowel and bladder UK: www.bbuk.org.uk

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