

**DEFINITION**

- Firm stools: Stools that appear like rabbit pellets, or seem very round and clumpy is a sign of constipation.
- Painful passage of stools: A reliable sign of constipation is discomfort or slight bleeding with the passage of a bowel movement.
- Inability to pass stools: These children feel a desperate urge to have a bowel movement (BM), have discomfort in the anal area, but are unable to pass a BM after straining and pushing for more than 10 minutes.

**Common Misconceptions in Defining Constipation**

A large amount of stool unaccompanied by any of the conditions just described are usually normal variations in BMs. Some normal people have formed BMs daily without any pain. Children who eat large quantities of food pass extremely large BMs. Babies less than 6 months of age commonly grunt, push, strain, draw up the legs and become flushed in the face during passage of BMs. However, they don't cry. These behaviors are normal and should remind us that it is difficult to have a BM while lying down.

**Causes**

Constipation is often due to a diet that does not include enough fiber. Drinking or eating too many milk products can cause constipation. It's also caused by repeatedly waiting too long to go to the bathroom. If constipation begins during toilet training, usually the parent is applying too much pressure.

**Expected Course**

Changes in the diet usually relieve constipation. After your child is better, be sure to keep her on a non-constipating diet so that it doesn't happen again.

Sometimes the trauma to the anal canal during constipation causes an anal fissure (a small tear). This is confirmed by finding small amounts of bright red blood on the toilet tissue or the stool surface.

**HOME CARE**

Diet for Infants (1 Year Old and younger)

- If under 2 months of age, try 1 teaspoon of dark Karo syrup twice a day
- If over 2 months old, give ½ to 1 oz. apple or prune juice twice each day.

- If over 4 months old, add strained foods with a high fiber content: apricots, prunes, peaches, pears, plums, beans, peas, or spinach twice daily.

Diet for Children (More than 1 Year Old)

- Make sure that your child eats fruits or vegetables at least three times each day (raw unpeeled fruits and vegetables are best). Increase bran.
- Bran is an excellent natural stool softener because it has a high fiber content. Make sure that your child's daily diet includes a source of bran: bran flakes, bran muffins, shredded wheat, graham crackers, oatmeal, high fiber cookies, brown rice, or whole wheat bread. Popcorn is one of the best high-fiber foods for children over 4 years old.
- Decrease consumption of constipating foods, such as milk, ice cream, yogurt, cheese, and cooked carrots.

**Regular Bathroom Time:** Encourage your child to establish a regular bowel pattern by sitting on the toilet for 10 minutes after meals, especially breakfast. If your child is resisting toilet training by holding back, stop the toilet training for a while and put her back in diapers or Pull-ups.

**Stool Softeners.** If a change in diet doesn't relieve the constipation, give your child a stool softener with dinner every night for 1 week. Stool softeners are not habit forming. They work 8 to 12 hours after they are taken. Examples of stool softeners that you can buy at your drug store without a prescription are Metamucil or Citrucel (1 tablespoon), or plain mineral oil (1 tablespoon).

**Measures for Acute Rectal Pain.** If your child has acute rectal pain needing immediate relief, one of the following will usually provide quick relief: sitting in a warm bath to relax the anal sphincter, a glycerine suppository, or gentle rectal stimulation for 10 seconds using a thermometer.

**CALL OUR OFFICE IMMEDIATELY**

If your child develops severe rectal or abdominal pain.