Constipation

When an infant, toddler or older child's bowel movements become irregular or painful, constipation may, indeed, be the problem. The key to making the determination whether your child is in fact constipated, is related to the consistency of the stool, (poo). Excessively dry, firm and hard-to-pass stools, or an obvious decrease in the normal frequency for your child may indicate they are suffering with constipation.

Constipation in the Infant

A baby's bowel movements can vary enormously depending on the child. Some exclusively breastfed babies have a bowel movement after every feed; while others may hold out for a week or even longer, and still be deemed to be '*normal'*. As a parent, you need to determine whether the child is suffering from *true constipation*, or whether it is simply normal bowel movements that are occurring every few days.

Consistency of the stool is the key to defining constipation in breastfed babies. Rather than liquidy, pasty stools, the constipated baby's stool will be more like little hard pellets. If the consistency is loose and there is no apparent difficulty for the child to pass them, *then the child is not constipated*. Infants experiencing painful bowel movements might arch their backs, tighten their buttocks or cry excessively. Keep in mind that infants do have weak abdominal muscles and will therefore often strain during bowel movements.

Constipation in the Toddler and Older Child

There are many factors that may contribute to constipation in the toddler and older child. A few of the more common causes include:

- Poor fluid intake
- Low fibre intake
- Medication
- High intake of constipating foods such as white refined carbohydrates, certain fruits/vegetables (e.g. Banana, applesauce and carrot baby food and 'baby foods' thickened with tapioca can be constipating so these foods should be reduced or eliminated in your child's diet.) and dairy products.

- Ignoring urges to have a bowel movement (e.g. when a child is busy playing or during school).
- Withholding stool due to past painful bowel movements

Dietary Management:

Infants and toddlers

Prune, apple, or pear juices can help with constipation in this age group.

You should reduce or eliminate dairy. A milk-based formula, as well as dairy in the mothers diet which is passed through the breast milk, may lead to constipation in some infants. Any other kinds of dairy that an older baby may consume, such as yogurt and cheese, may have a similar affect.

> *One study (1) found that 6% of children with an allergy to cow's milk protein suffered from constipation. Once this was removed from the diet the condition resolved.*
>
> *In a study (2) investigating chronic constipation in children, 66% of the children had resolution of their condition following the withdrawal of the cow's milk protein.*

If the child is eating excessive amounts of refined carbohydrates, try to reduce these in the diet and substitute higher fibre alternative such as whole grain breads and cereals, as well as fruits and vegetables such as apricots, sweet potatoes, pears, prunes, peaches, plums, beans, peas, broccoli and spinach.

Older Children

It is important to include whole grain foods, fruits and vegetables in both your child's diet *and your diet*. Research suggests that the child is far more likely to accept these foods if the child sees them in their parents diet also.

You should also reduce constipating foods in your child's diet, including excessive milk, other dairy products (e.g. cheese and ice cream) and refined carbohydrates such as white rice, white pasta and white bread. You may need to eliminate milk from your child's diet to get control of their constipation. Your child will need to get calcium from other dietary sources or take a calcium supplement and they also may need to take a multivitamin or vitamin D supplement since milk is the primary source of these nutrients.

It is important for children to keep themselves well hydrated. If a child does not drink adequate fluids, he/she is more likely to get constipated.

Some children benefit from probiotics although there is not conclusive evidence about their role in treating constipation. Probiotics may be given by feeding certain brands of yogurt high in probiotics or by giving the child probiotic supplements.

1. Clein N W 1954 Cow's milk allergy in infants. Pediatric Clinic of North America
2. Iacono G et al 1998 Intolerance of cow's milk and chronic constipation in children New England Journal of Medicine