

Childhood constipation

What's causing my child's constipation?

In most cases, it's not caused by any disease or illness. Some children – just like some adults – will simply have a tendency to get 'bunged up'. In others, it might be caused by habit, lifestyle or pain on going to the toilet. The end result is much the same – going infrequently and with a struggle, with the passage of hard or rabbit-like stools. Very hard or large stools cause pain and sometimes, bleeding. If your child gets very constipated then 'soiling' may result – caused by liquid seeping out around the constipated stool.

Will it damage my child's bowel?

No. It can be very distressing and uncomfortable, but it will not cause any serious harm. This applies even if there is bleeding – it's common for a big, hard stool to cause a small split – or 'fissure' which can bleed. But this will heal up once the constipation is sorted out.

Are there any self-help measures we can try?

Yes. It's important for your child to take lots of exercise, drink plenty of fluids and eat enough fruit and fibre. If you're uncertain about your child's diet, or what advice to follow, have a word with your health visitor. One of the most important tricks to sort out childhood constipation is called 'scheduled toileting'. This simply means having a regular routine

which increase the odds of your child being able to go the toilet properly. Most of us feel the urge to open our bowels first thing in the morning, shortly after breakfast. It's important that your child makes the most of this feeling. The trouble is, we all tend to be rushing around in the morning – so we're guilty of ignoring or fighting the urge to go. This tends to aggravate constipation. So you may find that just building an extra 15 minutes into your morning routine gives your child the time to go to the toilet properly. A 'reward' system for a successful outcome may help – but don't punish a failure to go.

What about laxatives?

Many children with constipation need laxatives to get them going. There are several types. Don't give up if the first one prescribed doesn't work – the dose may need increasing or, failing that, an alternative, or a combination, may be needed. They're all very safe and, usually, very effective, too.

Isn't it bad to take laxatives long term?

No. These days, doctors recommend using laxatives for a long time in childhood constipation. There's no harm at all in long-term use – the bowel doesn't get 'lazy' – and stopping them too soon may just trigger the constipation again. So laxative treatment often goes on for months – and it should be continued for several weeks even when the problem seems to be sorted out.