
Managing Short-term Constipation in Children (4-18 years)

What is a normal bowel movement?

Bowel movements can be very different from one child or teen to another. Stools are usually brown, but other colours are normal too. Stool colour can reflect the colour of foods eaten. Normal stools are soft, shaped like a smooth sausage and pass easily.

How often your child or teen has a bowel movement can vary. Some children have a bowel movement every day. Others have stool less often. Young children may have bowel movements more often than older children or teens.

How do I know if my child or teen is constipated?

Short-term constipation usually doesn't last longer than two weeks. It usually clears up by adding more fibre to the diet. Your child or teen may have short-term constipation if he:

- Has dry, hard stools.
- Strains and experiences pain when he has a bowel movement.
- Doesn't have stool as often as he normally does. But having less frequent bowel movements alone does not mean your child or teen is constipated as long as stools are soft, pain-free and follow his usual pattern.

There are many factors that can make constipation more likely to occur:

- Changes in diet.
- Decrease in fluid intake.
- The child or teen is ill with a fever or vomiting.
- Stressful situations or a change in routine For example, not being able to go to the toilet when away from home.
- Not having enough time for a bowel movement.

If you are concerned about your child's or teen's constipation, talk to your health care provider. It is important to get help if it doesn't clear up quickly. Your health care provider can help you find the best treatment plan for your child or teen.

The dietary steps below may help manage constipation that lasts less than two weeks.



Steps you can take

- Help your child or teen choose a variety of healthy foods. "Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide"
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide can help with healthy meal planning.
- Offer foods that are good sources of fibre every day such as whole grains, legumes (dried beans, peas and lentils), vegetables and fruit. Here are some ideas:
 - Use 100% whole grain breads, rolls, pita or bagels when making toast or sandwiches. Look for the words "whole grain" in the first ingredient in the ingredient list.
 - Choose higher fibre cereals such as bran flakes, whole wheat biscuits and oatmeal.
 - Serve meals made with legumes (dried beans, peas and lentils) as an alternative to meat more often. You could also try, half the amount of meat you normally would and replace it with beans.
 - Try whole grains such as brown rice, whole wheat pasta, barley and quinoa.
 - Offer vegetable and/or fruit at every meal and snack. Encourage your child or teen to eat the peels when possible.
 - Offer fruit instead of juice.
 - Meal and snack ideas:
 - Bean or lentil casseroles, stews, soups or dahl.

- Whole wheat pasta with vegetables.
 - Oatmeal or high fibre cereals with fruit.
 - Vegetable pizza on whole wheat crust.
 - Whole wheat roti and channa (chick peas).
 - Black bean dip or hummus with whole grain crackers.
 - Berry banana yogurt smoothie.
 - Homemade blueberry bran muffin.
- Gradually add higher fibre foods to your child or teen's diet. This will help prevent gas and stomach pain.
 - As you increase fibre ensure that your child drinks more fluid.
 - Offer plenty of fluids. Water, milk and small amounts of 100% juice are good choices.
 - Juices such as prune, apple or pear juice may help make stool softer and easier to pass. Drink small amounts of 100% juice each day:
 - Ages 4-6: no more than 125-175 mL ($\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ cup).
 - Ages 7-18: no more than 250-375 mL (1 – 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups).
 - Prunes are commonly given to help constipation. Try adding a serving of prunes to cereal or yogurt each day. One Canada's Food Guide serving of prunes is 60 mL ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup).
 - Set up a good toilet routine:
 - After meals is a good time to go to the toilet.
 - Take enough time on the toilet. Do not rush.
 - Encourage physical activity. Children over 5 years and teens should aim for a total of at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. For more information on physical activity and children see the additional resources.

Special consideration

- Do not give fibre supplements unless recommended by your health care provider. Children and teens should get extra fibre from foods only.
- Do not stop offering certain foods because you think they will cause constipation. Individual foods do not usually cause constipation. But not eating enough high fibre foods or drinking enough fluids may add to constipation.
- If short-term constipation does not clear up after trying the suggestions given here, speak to your healthcare provider. Constipation can sometimes become chronic or long term. Chronic constipation is managed differently than short-term constipation.
- Some possible signs of chronic constipation are:
 - Fewer than 3 complete stools per week.
 - Overflow soiling (loose stool that is passed without the child realizing it).
 - Stools that look like rabbit droppings.
 - Large, infrequent stools that can block the toilet.
 - Poor appetite that improves when a large stool is passed.
 - Abdominal pain that comes and goes with passing stool.
 - Postures that show that the child is trying to keep stool in - typically walking on tip-toes with straight legs and an arched back.
 - Straining.
 - Anal pain.
 - Anal fissure (small tear in the anus).
 - Bleeding with hard stools and painful bowel movements.

Children and teens may develop chronic constipation if they have had constipation or anal fissures before. For more information about chronic constipation see additional resources below. If you think your child or teen has chronic constipation, take your child to see their doctor.



Additional Resources

- Food Sources of Fibre
[http://www.pennutrition.com/viewhandout.aspx?
Portal=RbCR&id=JMfrUQE=&PreviewHandout=bA==](http://www.pennutrition.com/viewhandout.aspx?Portal=RbCR&id=JMfrUQE=&PreviewHandout=bA==)

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Notes

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