What Parents Should Know About Constipation in Children

Constipation in children can cause abdominal pain and hard and/or infrequent stools.

Other symptoms of constipation include straining with bowel movements, large stools, abdominal distention, nausea, vomiting, poor appetite, urinary accidents, frequent urinary tract infections, and psychological distress. More confusing symptoms include fecal accidents (loose stool leaking around a hard stool). Thankfully, 90% of constipation in children has no underlying organic cause. Surprisingly, constipation can occur in children with regular bowel movements, making it hard for parents to recognize.

Diagnosis

Depending on length of symptoms and family history of medical disorders, your physician may get blood work, imaging, stool studies, and other laboratory tests. Some concerning signs are constipation since infancy, poor weight gain, stunted height, frequent mouth sores, a physical examination result concerning for a malformation of the spine or rectum, or having someone in the family with celiac or thyroid disease. Without these concerns, treatment may be started first.

Treatments

Laxatives or stool softeners in large doses are the first steps of treatment. This is important because if a smaller dose is started first, symptoms could get worse, making it harder to successfully wean off medications. Osmotic laxatives increase the water content of stool to make it softer. Some examples include polyethylene glycol (MiralAX), milks of magnesium, magnesium citrate, and lactulose. Stimulant laxatives stimulate the intestines to increase water and electrolytes and these examples include sennosides (Senokot) and bisacodyl (Dulcolax). Most laxatives have been proven safe to use for chronic constipation. Your physician should be monitoring symptoms throughout, and laxatives rarely cause dependency when used appropriately.

Drinking plenty of water, taking in normal fiber amounts for age, and avoiding excessive amounts of dairy are important. Behavioral techniques include having your child sit on the toilet after meals for about 5 minutes. Have them sit without distractions and with their knees elevated higher than hips. To help defecate, they can blow bubbles or something similar. A reward chart helps if your child has become fearful of the toilet.

Timeline of Constipation

Constipation treatment occurs in stages. The initial stage is to clear stool from the large intestine, and the second stage is to main-

Other helpful actions to treat constipation in a child include:

- Drink plenty of water
- Avoid excess dairy
- Sit on the toilet after meals
- Eat foods high in fiber
- Reward charts

For more information:

GI Kids: https://gikids.org/?s=constipation
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgBj7Mc_4sc&feature=youtu.be
American Academy of Pediatrics: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/abdominal/Pages/Constipation.aspx

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