

# Constipation in Children: Little Changes That Help A Lot

Constipation affects the gastrointestinal tract (“the gut”) and can make children feel uncomfortable. It is very common and can be treated. This handout will explain constipation and go over simple changes that you can make at home to improve your child’s symptoms.

## What is Constipation?

Constipation is when stools (poop) are hard, dry and difficult or uncomfortable to get out. This discomfort can also make your child hold in his or her poop and not want to use the bathroom. Sometimes, your child may leak loose poop around the hard poop that is stuck.

## What is the Goal for Normal Pooping?

The goal is for your child’s poop to be soft and similar in texture to mashed potatoes or soft-serve ice cream. Your child should poop 1-2 times per day when he or she is not constipated.

## What Helps? Making Changes to What Your Child Eats and Drinks

### HIGH FIBER FOODS

- Offer your child high fiber foods, such as the examples below. Fiber will help soften poop and move food faster through your child’s body so he or she will poop more often.
- Look at nutrition labels and choose foods that have 3 or more grams of fiber per serving.
- How much fiber should you give your child each day? Take your child’s age in years and add 5 grams. (Example: 3-year-old + 5 = 8 grams fiber each day)

### **High Fiber Foods Table (2-3 grams per serving)**

Fruits	Apples, apricots, dried figs*, oranges, prunes*, strawberries
Vegetables	Carrots, broccoli, green peas, lima beans, parsnips
Grains	Brown rice, whole wheat bread, whole wheat pasta, whole wheat tortillas
Nuts and Seeds	Popcorn*, pistachios*, sunflower seeds*, walnuts*
Beans	Black beans, lentils, navy beans, pinto beans
Cereal	Multigrain cereal, oatmeal, whole grain cereal, shredded wheat

\*Not for children under 1 year

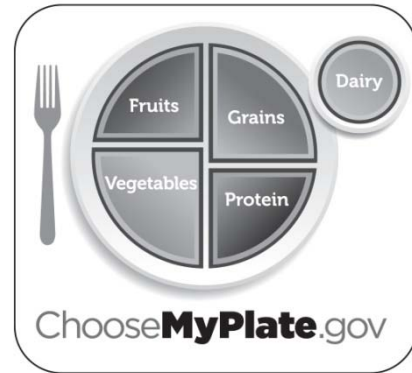
### DRINKS

- Drink more water. Water helps fiber work better and softens hard poop. Bring a water bottle with you wherever you go!
- Limit milk to 2-3 cups a day or fewer. Too much milk can make constipation worse.

- Fruit juice (even 100%) doesn't have a lot of fiber. It is always better to eat a piece of fruit than to drink it.
- Don't give drinks that are bubbly, sugary or caffeinated.

### MORE TIPS

- Leave the skin on fruits like apples and pears.
- Mix a higher fiber cereal with one that your child already likes.
- Replace white grains (breads, pasta and rice) with whole wheat grains.
- Limit foods that are high in starch, like bananas, white bread, pasta and rice.
- Use the plate planner on the right as a guide when serving your child meals.



## What Helps? Making Changes to Bathroom Habits

### Younger toilet-trained children

- Schedule toilet time 3-4 times a day. This is best in the morning and after meals.
  - Don't let your child's feet dangle. Use a stepstool to prop up his or her feet with knees bent at a right angle (90 degrees). *(See picture on right.)*
  - Try blowing up balloons on the toilet. This helps use the same muscles for pushing poop.
  - Make the bathroom a happy place with books, games and stories.
  - Give your child lots of praise for simply sitting on the toilet.
  - Reward your child for spending time on the toilet. You can use stickers or small prizes.
- Do not focus on whether your child poops** – it is the act of sitting on the toilet that is most important.



### School-aged children

- Tell your child to listen to his or her body and not to ignore the urge to poop
- Schedule 5 minutes two times a day for your child to spend relaxing on the toilet. Without this, your child might not take a break to poop. Try to schedule the 5 minute break before or after school.
- Many kids don't like to poop at school. Tell your child to use the nurse's office as a private toilet, if needed.

## What if Constipation Doesn't Get Better?

If your child is still constipated even after you make the changes in this handout, he or she might need medication to help. You should talk about this with your child's doctor.