



LET IT GO!

Top tips for relieving childhood constipation

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Constipation in kids. It's so common it has become normal. But there is nothing normal about being backed up. Constipation must be relieved if your child is to enjoy optimal health. And let's be honest—everyone feels better after a good poop!

We now know, through recent research, that the gut and brain are intimately connected. Consider these three ways constipation influences your child's behaviour and mood:

1. The stool is a primary pathway for flushing waste from the body. As stool sits in the colon, hormones and chemicals can be reabsorbed into the body where they can interfere with neurologic function.
2. Bowel irritation and inflammation caused by stagnant stool can stimulate immune cell activity, increase intestinal permeability and reduce nutrient absorption. Inflammatory messages are sent from the gut to the brain while valuable nutrients needed to manage that inflammation are reduced.
3. Constipation causes pain and discomfort that many children cannot articulate; it can be expressed as mood and behaviour flare-ups and can also interfere with sleep quality.

THE SCOOP ON POOP

Constipation can be characterized by the quality of stool or the frequency of stool. Hard, pebbly stool that is difficult to pass is clearly recognizable as constipation. But soft squiggly stool also indicates incomplete evacuation of the bowel. Reflux can also be constipation related, as can heartburn. In terms of frequency, any person who is not pooping at least once a day is constipated, even if that poop is well formed.

Here are my top ten strategies to get the bowels moving!

1. **Magnesium.** This mineral brings water into the colon and stimulates the muscles

in the digestive lining. It can be given as a supplement (powder available for young ones who cannot swallow pills), starting slowly and increasing until stools soften. There is little risk of taking too much magnesium, but if your child has any affect other than soft stools, stop. If diarrhea ensues, cut back, as you've gone too far in the other direction!

2. **Zinc.** Zinc assists in the synthesis of digestive enzymes and hydrochloric acid in the stomach. Liquid zinc is easy to give to children and is highly absorbable. There is a risk of zinc overdose, so you don't want to use high doses without consulting a practitioner. That said, 15 mg used as directed and for a short time (up to one month) is quite safe to try for constipation relief.

3. **Probiotics.** Bacteria are digestive regulators – they can help with constipation and diarrhea. There is, at this point, no toxic upper limit for probiotics. However, if your child experiences mood, digestive, or skin reactions to a probiotic, cut back. Choose one that has multiple strains and no fillers. Dose can range from 11 million to 50 billion CFUs; try to work up to twenty billion CFUs per day, as there may be an adjustment period with bowel frequency. Stubborn cases may require more, so at that point, consult with a practitioner. Fermented food can also be a great source of probiotic bacteria.

4. **Boost fat & fibre, while reducing sugar.**

Fibre from fruit, vegetables, whole grains and seeds bulk up the stool and keep bowels moving. But too much fibre, especially without adequate hydration, can cause irritation and plug things up (see #6!). More often than not, especially in children, the issue is a lack of fibre, so increasing these foods is a good start. Healthy fats from fish, meat, avocado, seeds, and coconut lubricate the bowel and nourish the gut lining. Coconut oil is a particularly helpful fat because it does not require bile for digestion like most fats do, and constipation is sometimes related to poor bile flow. Sugar negatively affects

the microbial balance in the gut, which can contribute to constipation.

5. **Slippery Elm powder.** A super supplement for getting the poop flowing and soothing irritated mucus membranes. It gently adds bulk to the stool, while keeping it soft, to help with an easier passing. Great if there has been any damage to the intestinal lining, as it will also help calm local inflammation.

6. **Hydration.** A school-aged child should drink 1-2 liters of pure water throughout the day to keep the bowels moving. A constipated child might need even more. Fruit juice does not count as water because of its sugar content.

7. **Castor oil belly rubs.** Castor oil is a time tested therapy for all things gut-related. Castor oil naturally reduces inflammation and stimulates lymphatic flow and, by extension, bowel movement. Rub the oil clockwise around the belly button, pressing as deeply as you can without causing discomfort.

8. **Get moving.** Encourage outdoor play, running, skipping, jumping and twisting. Movement creates... well, movements!

9. **Increase serotonin-boosting foods.**

Serotonin is a neurotransmitter involved in motility and fluid control of the bowels. It works as an important signaling agent for the cells of the GI tract that are responsible for the muscle movements that push the poop through. Eggs, salmon, turkey, and nuts are high in tryptophan, an amino acid used to make serotonin.

10. **Assess and reduce stress.** Stress puts us into a sympathetic state (fight or flight) via the master stress hormone, cortisol. When we are in that state, blood flow is routed away from our entire digestive tract, which can result in constipation.

If your child is constipated, meaning they do not have a least one well-formed bowel movement every day, their body is under stress. Chemicals and hormones are allowed to recirculate, irritation increases, absorption can decrease. As a result mood, focus, sleep, learning and overall health can suffer.

Relieving constipation will free up energy so that your child's body can function at its best. If none of these suggestions help, see a practitioner to assess for undiagnosed food sensitivities, which might be slowing down digestive function. •