

# Nutrition Newsletter

## Constipation Treatment for Infants and Children

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For children, constipation is a very common and frustrating problem. It is defined as the passage of hard and painful stools or going four or more days without a bowel movement. The most common cause of constipation usually stems from a diet that is low in fiber, but it can also be caused by drinking too much milk (12-16oz/day) or not drinking enough water. Another cause may be waiting too long to use the restroom.

If a child has experienced constipation and has had hard and painful stools, he or she will then begin to hold his bowel movements to prevent it from hurting again. This begins a cycle that makes the constipation continue and become worse.

### **Treating Constipation:**

The most effective way to treat constipation is to change the child's diet. Your child will most likely be on stool softeners until the symptoms of constipation have improved with a non-constipation diet. The goal is to have your child have one to two soft stools each day.

### **Diet Treatment for Infants:**

For breastfed infants, constipation is uncommon because breast milk is digested so well. It is, however, common for a baby that is exclusively breastfed to only have a bowel movement every one to two weeks

since the milk is digested so well. If the bowel movement is soft or even watery, then it is not considered constipation although it occurs infrequently. It may also be normal for infants to strain and groan while passing a bowel movement- regardless if they are breastfed or drinking iron fortified infant formula. As long as the bowel movement is soft or watery, then it is not considered constipation. Remember, iron in infant formulas does not cause constipation and that you should not switch to a low iron formula because your child has constipation.

**If you suspect your infant has constipation, then you can:**

**Increase fluids:** Give about 2 to 4 ounces of water or diluted fruit juices 1-2 times each day, or try switching to a soy formula. Try juices like prune or apple.

**Increase fiber:** If your infant is over four months old and is experiencing constipation, you could try to feed them sources of foods that are high in fiber, such as cereals, strained prunes, apricots, or spinach.

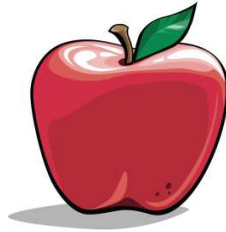
### **Diet Treatment for Children:**

If your child is having constipation, changing his or her diet is usually the best way to treat and prevent symptoms.



**Increase fluids:** Increase the amount of fluids – water and fruit juices – that your child drinks each day. They should consume a minimum of 2 to 3 glasses per day.

**Increase fiber:** A good way to increase fiber consumption is to increase the amount of fruits and vegetables that your child eats. Raw, unpeeled fruits and vegetables have the most fiber, such as beans, sweet potatoes, peas, turnip greens, raw tomatoes, and corn. Popcorn also is a great source of fiber or vegetable soup because not only is it high in fiber, but it also is a great way to add more fluid to your child's diet. Give enough grams of fiber each day to equal their age in years plus 5. Check nutrition fact labels for high fiber foods and snacks.



**Increase bran:** Increasing bran in your child's diet will help alleviate any constipation. Bran cereals, bran muffins, shredded wheat, graham crackers, or whole wheat bread are good sources of bran.

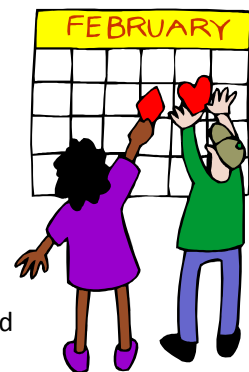
**Decrease constipation foods:** Foods that cause constipation are cow's milk, yogurt, cheese, cooked carrots, and bananas. If your child enjoys milk, consider switching him or her to soy milk, which has been shown to soften stools. If your child is unable to consume milk, then offer a multivitamin or other sources of calcium (fortified orange juice).

### **Treatments for Acute Constipation:**

If you have a child who has been constipated for a long period of time, or he or she is having significant pain with bowel movements, sometimes an enema, glycerin suppository or high mineral oil is needed to 'clean out' backed up stool before stool softeners will work. If you suspect acute constipation, consult your pediatrician for more information on how to begin this treatment.

### **Behavior Modification:**

If you have younger children, encourage your child to have regular bowel patterns. A good approach is to have your child sit on the toilet for about ten minutes after meals 1 to 2 times each day. The use of simple rewards or a daily calendar with stars or stickers is also a good way to encourage your child to take medication for constipation issues. Also, record bowel movements on a calendar to easily keep track of pattern.



### **Important Reminders:**

**Be patient.** Constipation can be a problem that takes time to improve. Avoid embarrassing or punishing your child. Avoid frequent use of enemas or suppositories.

**Call your doctor** if the constipation your child is experiencing doesn't improve in 2 to 3 weeks, or if your child is soiling his or her pants because of leakage stool.