

SOUTHFIELD PEDIATRICS

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Treatment of Constipation

Constipation is one of the most frequently discussed concerns in pediatrics. Before addressing treatment, it is important to be clear about a definition of constipation. Constipation is the passage of hard stools. It is not related to the frequency of the passage of stools because this can be highly variable. Many young infants will have a bowel movement every time that they eat. Others may go only one or two times per week. **As long as the stools passed are soft, a child is not constipated.**

Many babies will grunt, groan, turn red, pull up their legs, or make other such signs of effort when they are trying to have a bowel movement. **This is normal.** Babies have a poorly coordinated musculature and often have difficulty moving their bowels. This situation will improve with time and should never be viewed as a reason to change from an iron-fortified formula to an iron-deficient formula (the so called low iron formulas).

With true constipation the stools will come out like small rocks and can often cause bleeding by tearing the skin around the anus. These anal fissures are not dangerous but should be viewed as a sign that a child is constipated. Dietary changes will usually be enough to relieve constipation.

Infants less than 4 months old: If breastfed, constipation rarely occurs. If it does occur, try to get the child to take some extra water each day. If formula fed, you should also try to get the baby to take extra water daily. One suggestion is to add one teaspoon of Karo syrup to each four ounce bottle of water. This may help and is fine to try for a few days. If adding extra water does not relieve constipation, the next step would be to try a few ounces of diluted fruit juice. Grape, apple, or prune juice will usually help soften the stools.

Infants older than 4 months old: Increase the amount of food with a high fiber content, such as cereals, apricots, prunes, peaches, pears, beans, or peas. Avoid bananas and apples since they can cause harder stools.

With older children, increase the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables eaten daily. Also increase the daily consumption of water, and try to get your child to eat bran. Milk can be constipating; if your child drinks a large quantity of milk and is constipated, limit milk intake to approximately 16 ounces per day.

Do not give enemas or suppositories without first consulting your physician. These can be habit forming and should only be used as a last resort.