

Dietary advice for constipation

What is normal?

Bowel movements can be very different from one baby to another. What is normal for your baby depends on his age and what he eats and drinks.

- Breastfed babies who have not started solids yet usually have soft, yellow stools. Some breastfed babies have bowel movements every day. Others have bowel movements less often. Some breastfed babies do not have bowel movements for several days or longer without any reason for concern.
- Formula-fed babies can have yellow, green or brown stools. Stools can be mushy, pasty, soft or firm, depending on the type of formula your baby is given.

When there is a change in what your baby eats, you will notice a change in stool. For example, when your baby starts solid foods, stools become browner and firmer.

What is abnormal?

Your baby may have constipation if:

- Your baby cries or strains while he or she has a bowel movement.
- Stools are small and hard.
- Stool passage happens less often than normal. But having fewer bowel movements alone does not mean your baby is constipated as long as stools are soft, pain-free and follow your baby's usual pattern.

Babies < 6 months :

Make an appointment with Dr. Stander if you think your young baby is constipated. There is no special dietary guidelines that you can follow.

Babies 6 – 12 months :

Offer your baby a variety of healthy foods that are the right texture for his or her age. Foods should be easy to chew and swallow. Offer your baby foods that are good sources of fibre such as whole grains, legumes (beans, peas, lentils), vegetables and fruit.

Fibre-containing foodstuffs. Ideas for increasing fibre in the diet :

- Give whole grain infant cereals containing oats.
- Add pureed, mashed or minced soft fruits or vegetables to infant cereals.
- Offer cooked and mashed dried beans, peas and lentils more often **as an alternative to meat.**
- Try cubed or diced soft-cooked vegetables or soft fruits, strips of low GI toast and whole grain crackers (ProVita).
- Meal and snack ideas:
 - o Bean or lentil stews
 - o Cereal with mashed bananas and pureed prunes
 - o Minced meat with green peas and sweet potatoes
 - o Diced or pureed pears and yogurt
 - o Mashed squash and brown rice
 - o Mashed stewed dried fruit with yogurt

Remember to **gradually add fibre** to your baby's diet. This will help to prevent gas and stomach pain.

Offer extra fluids. In addition to breastmilk or formula, you can offer water in between meals and at regular feeding times in an open cup.

Juices such as apple or pear juice may help make stool softer and easier to pass. Give no more than 125ml – 175ml 100% juice per day.

For toddlers :

Offer your toddler a variety of healthy foods. Toddlers need three meals and two or three snacks every day. Offer your toddler foods that are good sources of fibre every day such as whole grains, legumes, vegetables and fruit.

Fibre-containing foodstuffs. Ideas for increasing fibre in the diet :

- Give whole grain cereals such as oats, Futurelife kids cereal, whole-wheat ProNutro.
- Change to whole grain breads or crackers. The Low GI choices is best.
- Serve meals made with legumes (dried beans, peas and lentils) as an alternative to meat more often. You can also try halving the amount of meat you would normally use and add legumes to make up that difference.
- Offer vegetable and/or fruit at every meal and snack. Serve vegetables and fruits with their skins whenever possible.
- Offer fresh, frozen or canned fruit instead of juice.
- Use whole grain whole wheat flour, oat bran, oatmeal or bean flour in pancake, muffin and cookie recipes.

Remember to gradually add fibre to your baby's diet. This will help to prevent gas and stomach pain.

Offer extra fluids. Offer plenty of fluids in an open cup.

Milk, water and small amounts of 100% juice are good choices. Limit milk to no more than 750ml or 3 cups per day as it will fill him or her up and leave less room for other foods.

Juices such as apple or pear juice may help make stool softer and easier to pass. Do not give more than 175ml of 100% juice each day.

Prune juice are commonly given to help constipation. Start with a small amount – about 15ml or one tablespoon, and increase the amount slowly.

Special considerations:

Only start making dietary changes when your healthcare provider says that it is okay. Diet and exercise changes are not the first treatment for chronic constipation, because they do not help to clear the large amount of stool from the colon. Adding extra fibre too soon can cause more constipation symptoms, such as soiling. Once the colon is cleared out, increasing high fibre foods and fluid can help prevent the constipation from recurring.

- Do not give your baby fibre supplements. Do not give your toddler fibre supplements unless recommended by your health care provider. Children should get extra fibre from food.
- Do not stop giving certain foods because you think they will cause constipation. Individual foods do not usually cause constipation. But not eating enough fibre rich foods or drinking enough fluids may add to constipation.

This article was compiled in conjunction with Riekie Van der Vyver, who is a registered dietician at Quenet's Family Pharmacy, Worcester (Tel: 023 347 0844 or email: riekievyver@lantic.net)

Acknowledgements:

1. NICUS : Nutrition Information Centre, University of Stellenbosch, Division of Human Nutrition. Website : <http://www.sun.ac.za/nicus>
2. PEN : Website : <http://www.pennutrition.com>
3. ADSA : Association for Dietetics South Africa : Website : <http://www.adsa.org.za>