

## Functional constipation in children

When your child suffers from constipation it can be very worrying and upsetting for both you and your child. In most cases there is NOT a serious underlying cause. This is known as *functional constipation*, and it is common in young children.

Here is some information and advice to help you and your child. Please ask us if you have further questions.

### Facts about functional constipation in children

- Constipation is NOT your child's fault.
- There is a backlog of stool, and this stretches the bowel making it more difficult to feel that you need to go to the toilet.
- Because it can be painful to pass stool, children are often scared to pass stool and so they try to avoid it.
- Old stool can go hard and be difficult to pass. As new food is eaten, new stool is made and this can leak around the old poo causing **soiling**. This can cause anxiety and embarrassment.

### Treatment

#### 1. Behaviour around passing stool

- Delay **toilet training** until your child is painlessly passing soft stool
- Review access to a toilet/potty for your child – is it always easy for your child to get to a toilet?
- Encourage your child to sit on the toilet/potty for 5-10 minutes, three times a day, preferably 20-30 minutes after meals. Try to make this time fun and relaxing – use games, books, toys! Raising the feet up a little on a stool and rocking gently may help.
- **Reward behaviours, NOT achievements**
  - Reinforce that this is not your child's fault. Do not punish them but use positive reinforcement
  - Encourage willingness to take the laxatives
  - Reward toilet/potty sits, even if they don't poop
- Keep a diary to monitor progress if you can

#### 2. Disimpaction stage

- Often there is a large amount of old stool to clear out with a high dose of laxatives (disimpaction)
- There will be large amounts of stool passed at this stage. Soiling and abdominal pain may get worse before they get better.
- Paracetamol can be used for abdominal pain if necessary.
- Consider the timing – ideally do this when your child is at home with you or another main care-giver for a few days

#### 3. Maintenance stage

- After disimpaction, a lower dose of laxative is used to help the bowel recover and get back into a regular pattern. This usually takes several months.
- **You must carry on with the laxative at this stage** or else the stool will build up again.
- With treatment, **most** children will be free of constipation in 6-12 months, but some need treatment for longer

#### 4. Diet and fluids

- Eating a balanced diet with fibre and plenty of fluids will help, but will not cure constipation alone
- Too much cow's milk can make constipation worse in some children so you may need to reduce cow's milk (please discuss this with your clinician or nutritionist).

#### 5. Exercise

- Encourage your child to be physically active