

Bowel Problems in Kids- Constipation

Chronic constipation is a common problem in children, reported to affect around 1 in 10 children worldwide. A small proportion suffer constipation due to an underlying organic disease, however in the vast majority (over 95%) it is considered a functional disorder. Constipation can affect bladder control, often contributing to daytime wetting and is a significant risk factor for recurrent urinary tract infections. It is also the most common reason for soiling (also known as faecal incontinence, or 'encopresis'), as constipation changes it affects the regulation of the bowel and dampens a child's ability to feel an urge to pass a poo. It is well understood that constipation +/- soiling is a substantial social and psychological burden, greatly affecting self esteem and the quality of life of the child and their families.

What causes constipation?

Functional constipation often develops due to multiple factors, ranging from genetic influences, changes the child's environment or general health, diet choices and fluid intake, psychological factors, or often a combination of these. Postponing or withholding stools is commonly observed and reported by parents, which usually results from one or more occasions of painful and often very large bowel motions, or fear around using the toilet. This leads to a cycle of difficulty coordinating the muscles needed to pass a poo effectively (ie the pelvic floor and anal sphincter), with incomplete bowel emptying, retained stools that become progressively dehydrated, and the potential for faecal impaction within the rectum and colon. The child's lack of awareness of the stools remaining within the bowel can lead to faecal smearing due to the overflow of soft stools passing around the retained stools.

What are the symptoms?

'Normal' bowel habit involves passing a soft, pain-free motion anywhere from 3 times a day to no less than 3 times a week. Constipation can involve:

- Pain or discomfort with toileting
- Passing small amounts of drier stools at a time, with occasional very large bowel motions
- Feeling as if you've not completely emptied or having difficulty emptying and needing to strain
- Tummy pain, cramps and abdominal bloating
- Irritable behaviour, change in appetite

How can Pelvic Health Physiotherapy help?

Our paediatric pelvic health physiotherapists approach the management of constipation with a thorough assessment, to understand each child's symptoms and circumstances, determine potential contributing factors, and an objective assessment using tools such as real time ultrasound. A bowel management program is tailored to each child and their caregivers, including education, practical strategies, toileting programs, support and guidance to improve each child's overall wellbeing. We also work closely with medical and other allied health services to ensure your child is well supported in their management.

For further information on constipation and toileting, please see the following resources:

- The Poo in You education video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgBj7Mc_4sc
- https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Constipation/?hc_location=ufi