



FACT SHEET

CONSTIPATION

* Constipation is when stools are hard, dry and difficult to pass. It **does not** refer to the frequency of bowel motions.

* A study looking at the bowel habits of healthy Australian children 0-2 years old found that stool frequency decreased with age. Between birth and 2 weeks of age 95% of infants passed more than 2 stools/day compared to 21% at 13-24 months. Breast fed infants passed more frequent and looser stools than formula fed infants and with a greater variation in frequency. Breast fed infants averaged about 4 stools/day (range about 1-8/day) compared to formula fed at 1-4/day, and those on solids 1-3/day. A few in each age group passed less than 1 stool/day with the largest number in the age range 7-24 months.

* Constipation is rare in breast fed infants. Infants may show signs of distress or pain before passing a motion but this is normal and a response to new body sensations. Intervals of several days between passing stools are not uncommon in the breast fed infant.

* Constipation may occasionally occur when infants are weaned from the breast to bottle as the gut adjusts to the infant formula. Information must be given to mothers about the importance of making formula correctly. To reduce the risk of constipation formula should be gradually introduced.

* Mothers of formula fed infants show more concern about stool hardness and constipation and consult health professionals more often for advice than mothers of breast fed infants. Constipation is more likely to occur in a formula fed infant when the formula is not made up according to directions. Health professionals and carers need to check for the following in constipated infants:-

- Is the formula the correct one for the infant's age?
- Is the formula made up correctly – the right number of scoops to the correct volume of water; cooled boiled water is placed in the bottle before the powder is added; the correct scoop is used; how packed is the scoop?
- Is the infant on solids before the recommended age?
- Activity (for infants over 6 months) - active infants tend to be less constipated

* Recommendations for relieving constipation in infants vary - ensure formula is made correctly; give extra cooled boiled water; give small amounts of diluted fruit juice. Prune juice contains a natural laxative which increases stool weight and water content. However as it is a bowel irritant, it should always be diluted and only given in small quantities to young infants. Introducing solids early will not alleviate constipation. For infants on solids check that the intake of fruit, vegetables, breads, cereals and fluids is proportionally adequate. Extra stewed fruit, water or diluted juice usually resolves the problem. Advice from a doctor is recommended before using laxatives or suppositories. Persistent constipation should be referred to a doctor as it may be a sign of an underlying medical problem such as Hirschsprung's disease.

* Constipation in young children is usually caused by a lack of fibre in the diet, low water intake, low levels of activity and holding back from going to the toilet because it hurts to pass a motion. To relieve constipation increase fruit, vegetable, bread and cereal intake and reduce milk intake where it is above recommended amounts. Bran supplements are not recommended for children – fibre is best obtained from foods. Increase water intake and activity and remind and encourage children to go to the toilet and not hold back. Small amounts of soft licorice may also help.

References.

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