

Guidelines around the use of laxatives for children with Down syndrome

Laxatives are a type of medicine used to treat constipation. Below is a brief explanation of the laxatives commonly used in children in the UK. It is also important to read through the information leaflet that comes with the medication. Laxatives for children should be prescribed by a healthcare professional and you should follow their advice about the correct medication and dose for your child.

There are two main types of laxatives:

Softeners which work by drawing water into the stool (poo) to help soften and lubricate. They are sometimes referred to as 'osmotic' laxatives.

Stimulants which are absorbed into the body and work by stimulating the muscles in the bowel to increase peristalsis. Stimulants are usually given in combination with a 'softener' laxative although they may be given on their own.

Softeners

Macrogols (MOVICOL, LAXIDO, COSMOCOL)

How to take

Each sachet of Macrogol should be mixed with at least 62mls of water which then forms the active 'laxative' medication. If the child will not drink this as it is then you can add a small amount of milk, yogurt, juice or similar to disguise the taste.

The powder must be made up with water before anything else is added, otherwise it may not work properly. The water that is used to make up the Macrogol sachet/s should not be included as part of the child's daily requirement as it is not absorbed into the body.

Try to give it at the same time every day. The dose can be divided if the child cannot take it all at once. Once made up it can be kept in the fridge for up to 24 hours.

How does it work

Macrogols work as a 'softener'. The water that makes up the Macrogol stays in the bowel is then 'locked' within the poo as it forms in the bowel. This keeps the poo soft and lubricated. As the poo is bulked up with the water, it fools the bowel into thinking it is full. The bigger poo then stimulates natural peristalsis (the muscular movement of the bowel that pushes the poo along). Macrogols are not absorbed into the body.

As the macrogols bind with the poo as it forms, they can take up to 72 hours to start to work when first given. Macrogols should be given every day (do not stop and start). The dose may be gradually reduced as the constipation improves.

There is more information about macrogols in the Bladder & Bowel UK leaflet: Understanding Macrogol Laxatives at: <https://www.bbuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Understanding-Macrogol-Laxatives-1-1.pdf>

Lactulose (DULPHULAC)

How to take

The prescribed dose of Lactulose can be given up to three times per day and can be mixed with a small amount of water to make it more palatable if necessary (it tastes very sweet).

How does it work?

Lactulose also works as a softener and is a man-made sugar. It works by drawing water into the large bowel (colon) to help soften the poo. It is therefore important that children are encouraged to drink regularly to help the Lactulose work effectively.

Lactulose can cause excessive wind and bloating when first taken, which may cause some discomfort. It may also contain a small amount of sugars such as lactose so should be used with caution in children with lactose intolerance.

Stimulants

Senna (SENOKOT)

How to take

Senna tends to work within 8-12 hours (although it can take much longer) so it is often suggested that it is given in the evening to produce a poo the next morning. The dose should be given all at once and not divided up. The timing of the dose can be adjusted if necessary (e.g. given in the morning) to produce a bowel movement at a more convenient time (for example outside school hours).

How does it work?

Senna contains naturally occurring chemicals (derived from the senna plant) and is classed as a stimulant laxative. It works by stimulating the nerves of the colon (large bowel) which make the bowel muscles contract more strongly (increase peristalsis) which then helps push the poo along towards the rectum (bottom).

Sodium picosulphate (DULCOLAX PICO, LAXOBERAL)

How to take

Sodium picosulphate usually works within 6-12 hours so again it is often advised to be given at bedtime.

How does it work

Sodium picosulphate is a stimulant laxative and is metabolised (undergoes a chemical process) by the bacteria in the large bowel into an active compound, which then stimulates the nerve endings in the bowel. This increases the muscle contractions (peristalsis), which help to push the poo along towards the rectum (bottom).

Usual treatment of constipation with laxatives

Children are usually prescribed a softener first, such as a macrogol, and then a stimulant laxative if necessary. You should always follow your healthcare professional's advice regarding the laxatives. Do not stop giving the laxatives unless advised to do so. If your child has been constipated for more than a few days, it is usually advised to continue with the laxatives, adjusting the dose as necessary, for several weeks or months after the problem has appeared to resolve. This is to enable the bowel to recover fully and prevent a relapse and the constipation reoccurring.

Further information regarding constipation and its treatment can be found on the Bladder & Bowel UK website. <https://www.bbuk.org.uk/bowel-resources/>