

Helping constipation

Preventing and improving the management of constipation

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Constipation is common in children with Down syndrome (up to 70%); however, there are lots of things that can be useful in preventing or helping to provide relief.

What can you do for your child to help reduce the likelihood of constipation:

- 1** Encourage a healthy diet to include a 'rainbow' of fruit and vegetables when weaning (which is a common trigger for the development of constipation).
- 2** Introduce probiotics into their diet.
- 3** Make sure they are getting enough fluid throughout the day.
- 4** Introduce correct sitting on a potty and/or toilet once weaning is established.
- 5** Abdominal massage, cycling legs, and encourage blowing games when on the potty or toilet.

Diet

Eating a rainbow of vegetables is important for good bowel function. A healthy diet naturally higher in fibres helps the gut and supports the microbiome (the range of bacteria within the gut).

Certain types of food can help prevent constipation, however, if your child is already constipated you should seek advice around treatment using laxatives as diet alone will not resolve it.



Fibre

Fibre is a type of carbohydrate found in plants. It is not digested or absorbed into the body but is essential to keep our bodies healthy and help prevent constipation. There are different types of fibre and it is important to know the difference as excess of one type (insoluble fibre) can, in some cases, make any constipation worse, while for others excess fibre can cause abdominal discomfort with bloating and wind.

Soluble Fibre



Soluble fibres dissolve in water. Some types of soluble fibre break down and form a gel-like substance in the colon. This then bulks up poo which helps the poo pass smoothly through the bowels and improves its form and consistency.

Some types of soluble fibre, known as probiotics, can also help maintain a healthy gut by increasing its number of good bacteria. Soluble fibre also delays stomach emptying, improving absorption of nutrients and helps regulate blood sugar levels.

Examples of soluble fibre



dried beans



oats - porridge



barley



citrus fruits



apples



strawberries



peas



flax and other
seeds and nuts

Insoluble fibre



Insoluble fibre is not digested thereby adding bulk and weight to the poo. This can be helpful in managing constipation, however, too much insoluble fibre can make it worse, particularly with slow gut transit.

Slow gut transit is when the poo moves slowly through the bowel due to reduced peristalsis (the muscular movement of the bowel). Reduced peristalsis can be common in children with Down syndrome due to low abdominal muscle tone and often a major contributory cause of constipation.

Insoluble fibre can make poo solid and heavier making it move through the bowel even slower.

Examples of insoluble fibre



wheat



bran



vegetables like
green beans and
dark leafy greens



root vegetables like
carrots, beets, and
radishes



fruit skins



intact whole
grains

Sorbitol

Sorbitol is a type of carbohydrate which is a water-soluble compound that occurs naturally in many fruits and vegetables.

It helps keep the poo soft by drawing water into the large bowel thereby helping prevent constipation.

Sorbitol is found particularly in dried fruits and fruit with stones.

Examples of fruits with higher levels of sorbitol



apricots



nectarines



cherries



peaches



pears



plums
(prunes)



dates

Probiotics

Probiotics are live bacteria that can have beneficial effects on our bodies. Our gut contains many millions of bacteria and probiotic supplements add to our existing supply of ‘good’ microbes. They help fight off the less friendly types and boost immunity against infections.

Probiotics can also help prevent constipation. Probiotics, such as lactobacilli and bifidobacteria, produce short-chain fatty acids which are said to help improve gut motility (peristalsis).

Probiotics containing *Bifidobacterium* strains have been shown to be the most effective in softening stools. Some strains have been shown to increase stool frequency as well as reduce symptoms such as bloating and discomfort. Probiotics are also thought to reduce the risk/severity of enterocolitis.

Fluids

Experience has shown us that weaning, when solids are introduced at 6 months, can be a trigger point for the development of constipation, particularly when breast or formula feeding is reduced, and cow’s milk is introduced. Therefore, making sure your child has enough fluids throughout the day is important.

NICE provide the following recommendations regarding fluid intake in children. www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg99/chapter/Recommendations#diet-and-lifestyle

Infants 0–6 months of age
700 mL, assumed to be from milk.

Babies 7–12 months of age
800 mL from milk and complementary foods and beverages, of which 600 mL is assumed to be water from drinks.

Children 1–3 years of age
1300 mL (900 mL from drinks).

Children 4–8 years of age
1700 mL (1200 mL from drinks).

Children 9–13 years of age
Boys — 2400 mL (1800 mL from drinks).
Girls — 2100 mL (1600 mL from drinks).

Cow's Milk



Cow's milk allergy can be a cause of constipation. If constipation fails to resolve or appears to have started after the introduction of cow's milk speak to your healthcare professional.

Early Potty Sitting



We are aware that weaning is often a trigger point for the development of constipation and sitting on a potty puts the child in the best position to have a poo. For older children who are sitting on a toilet, it is important to ensure that their feet are flat (resting on a step or stool if necessary) and their knees bent so they are higher than their hips. This helps relax the pelvic floor and straighten the end of the bowel which makes it much easier to do a poo.

Younger babies, who are not yet sitting, can be supported over a potty by having the infant's back to your front and your hands under their thighs so their hips are flexed, and knees bent which brings the child into a sitting/squat position.



Abdominal massage and exercises

Using tummy massage can help constipation.

It is important to discuss this with a healthcare professional, such as a health visitor or physiotherapist, before introducing it.



Do not do tummy massage:

- within an hour of the child having a feed/finished a meal
- within 3 months post abdominal surgery
- if the child is unwell or has a fever
- if the child has a heart condition unless their cardiac team have said this is ok
- with essential oils – use only vegetable oils such as olive, sunflower or almond oil
- directly on broken or inflamed skin

Exercises

With the child lying on their back, cycling their legs up towards their tummy can stimulate the stomach muscles and can also help to get things moving.

Encourage toddlers and older children to engage in blowing games while sitting on the potty or toilet. The increase in abdominal pressure will also help in getting things moving.

If your child is already constipated it is important to seek advice for treatment with laxatives.

For further information regarding constipation see www.downsyndromeuk.co.uk/health/constipation

