Constipation in Infants

Constipation in infants is a problem when bowel movements are hard, dry and difficult to pass. It is important to remember that while most infants pass stools daily, some do so only once every 2-3 days. If stools are less frequent but appear soft and easy to pass then the infant is not constipated.

CAUSES

- The most common cause of constipation in infants is "functional." This means there is no medical problem. In babies not yet on solids, it is most often due to lack of fluid.
- Older infants on solid foods can get constipated due to:
  - A lack of fluid.
  - A lack of bulk (*fiber*).
  - A lack of both.
- Some babies have brief constipation when switching from breast milk to formula or from formula to cow's milk.
- Constipation can be a side effect of medicine, but this is uncommon in infants.
- Constipation that starts at or right after birth can sometimes be a sign of problems with:
  - The intestine.
  - The anus.
  - Other physical problems.

SYMPTOMS

- Hard, pebble-like or large stools.
- Infrequent bowel movements.
- Pain or discomfort with bowel movements.
- Excess straining with bowel movements (more than the grunting and getting red in the face that is normal for many babies).

TREATMENT

The most common treatment for constipation is a change in the:

- Diet.
- Amount of fluids given.
- Sometimes medicines can be used to soften the stool or to stimulate the bowels.
- Rarely, a treatment to clean out the stools is needed.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- If your infant is not on solids, offer a few ounces (88 ml) of water or diluted 100% fruit juice daily.
- If your infant is over 6 months of age, in addition to water and fruit juice daily as mentioned above, increase the amount of fiber in the diet by adding:
  - High fiber cereals like oatmeal or barley.
  - Vegetables.
  - Fruits like plums or prunes.
- When your infant is straining to pass a bowel movement:
  - Gently massage the infant's tummy.
  - Give your baby a warm bath.
  - Lay your baby on their back and gently move the legs as if they were on a bicycle.
- Be sure to mix your infant's formula according to the directions on the can.
- Do not give your infant honey, mineral oil or syrups.
- Only use laxatives or suppositories if prescribed by your caregiver

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF YOUR BABY:

- Has a rectal temperature of 100.5º F (38.1° C) or higher lasting more than a day AND your baby is over age 3 months.
- Is still constipated in a few days despite our treatments.
- Has a loss of hunger (*appetite*).
- Cries with bowel movements.
- Has bleeding from the anus with passage of stools.
- Passes stools that are thin like a pencil.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF YOUR BABY:

- **Is 3 months old or younger with a rectal temperature of 100.4º F (38º C) or higher.**
- Is older than 3 months with a rectal temperature of 102º F (38.9º C) or higher.
- Has bloody stools.
- Has yellow colored vomit.
- Has abdominal expansion.

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