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CONSTIPATION

Description:

- Painful passage of bowel movements: The most reliable sign of constipation is discomfort with the passage of a bowel movement.
- Inability to pass stools: These children feel a desperate urge to have a bowel movement (BM), have discomfort in the anal area, and strain, but they are unable to pass anything.
- Infrequent bowel movements: Going 4 or more days without a BM can be considered constipation, even though this may cause no pain in some children and even be normal for a few. Exception: After the second month or so of life, many breast-fed babies pass normal, large, soft BMs at infrequent intervals (up to 7 days is not abnormal) without pain.

Common Misconceptions About Constipation

- Large or hard BMs unaccompanied by any of the conditions just described are usually normal variations in BMs. Some normal people have hard BMs daily without any pain. Babies less than 6 months of age commonly grunt, push, strain, draw up the legs, and become flushed in the face during passage of bowel movements. However, they don't cry. These behaviors are normal and should remind us that it is difficult to have a bowel movement while lying down. Cause:
- Constipation is often due to a diet that does not include enough fiber. Drinking or eating too many milk products can cause constipation. It's also caused by repeatedly waiting too long to go to the bathroom. The memory of painful passage of BMs can make younger children hold back. If constipation begins during toilet training, usually the parent is applying too much psychological pressure. Expected Course:
- Changes in the diet usually relieve constipation. After your child is better, be sure to keep him on a non-constipating diet so that it doesn't happen again.

Sometimes the trauma to the anal canal during constipation causes an anal fissure (a small tear). This is confirmed by finding small amounts of bright red blood on the toilet tissue or the stool surface.

HOME CARE:

Diet treatment for infants (less than 1 year old):

First try some Pedialyte then you may give fruit juices (like apple or prune juice) twice a day to babies less than 4 months old (1-2 ounces mixed in formula). Switching to soy formula may also result in looser stools. If your baby is over 4 months old, add strained foods with high fiber content such as cereals, apricots, prunes, peaches, pears, plums, beans, peas, or spinach twice a day. Avoid strained carrots, squash, bananas, and apples.

Diet treatment for older children (more than 1 year old)

- Make sure that your child eats fruits or vegetables at least three times a day (raw, unpeeled fruits and vegetables are best). Some examples are prunes, figs, dates, raisins, peaches, pears, apricots, beans, peas, cauliflower, broccoli, and cabbage. Warning: Avoid any foods your child can't chew easily.
- Increase bran. Bran is an excellent natural stool softener because it has a high fiber content. Make sure that your child's daily diet includes a source of bran, such as one of the new "natural" cereals, un-milled bran, bran flakes, bran muffins, shredded wheat, graham crackers, oatmeal, high-fiber cookies, brown rice, or whole wheat bread. Popcorn is one of the best high-fiber foods.
- Decrease the amount of constipating foods in your child's diet. Examples of constipating foods are milk, ice cream, cheese, yogurt, white rice, applesauce, bananas, and cooked carrots.
- Increase the amount of water your child drinks.

Sitting on the toilet (children who are toilet trained)

Encourage your child to establish a regular bowel pattern by sitting on the toilet for 10 minutes after meals, especially after breakfast. Some children and adults repeatedly get blocked up if they don't do this.

If your child is resisting toilet training by holding back, stop the toilet training for a while and put him back in diapers or pull-ups.

Stool softeners:

If a change in diet doesn't relieve the constipation, give a stool softener with dinner every night for one week. Stool softeners (unlike laxatives) are not habit forming. They work 8 to 12 hours after they are taken. Examples of stool softeners that you can buy at your drugstore without a prescription are Milk of Magnesia, Metamucil, Citrucel, or mineral oil. Give 1/2 to 1 tablespoon daily. *Another good stool softener is Miralax granule mix per directions 4-6 ounces per day at dinner.*

Common mistakes in treating constipation:

Don't use any suppositories or enemas without your physician's advise. These can cause irritation or fissures (tears) of the anus, resulting in pain and stool holding. Do not give your child strong oral laxatives without asking your physician because they can cause cramps and become habit-forming.

Enemas for acute constipation:

If your child has acute rectal pain needing immediate relief and your physician has said it's okay to give an enema, one of the following will usually provide quick relief: a glycerine suppository, a gentle rectal dilation with a lubricated finger (first cover the finger with plastic wrap) or a thermometer.