Constipation and Abdominal Pain

There are many causes of abdominal pain, but chronic constipation is the most common cause of recurrent abdominal pain in kids.

Constipation is the passage of hard, formed stools, often requiring extreme straining, and sometimes causing pain. It has nothing to do with the frequency of stooling. Some constipated kids have a bowel movement every single day and others may not have a bowel movement for a week or more.

Infrequent stooling is NOT a problem if the stools are soft and easy to pass when they occur. Not everybody has a daily bowel movement. Stools should be as loose as mustard in infancy, as thick as toothpaste or peanut butter in older toddlers. Stools should never be “balls” or “nuggets” at any age. Kids are not rabbits!!

Constipation can lead to a number of problems including poor appetite, crampy abdominal pain especially after eating and may be very severe, and encopresis, which is the leakage of stool into the underwear. If constipation is a chronic problem the rectum (the last portion of the intestine before the stool leaves the body) can become quite stretched. If this happens the child may loose the normal sensation of needing to have a bowel movement. Sometimes a big chunk of hard, dry stool sits in the rectum and softer, looser stool leaks around it. The child may not even be aware of this occurring! Often constipated children will avoid using the toilet as they have learned to associate it with pain. These children then also stretch their bladders and are at higher risk of urinary tract infection as they are not emptying their bladders often enough.

Many foods are well known for their ability to cause constipation. Bananas, rice, and cheese are constipating for almost everyone. Apple products, carrots, and sweet potatoes (think starchy) also firm up stools in many people. Excess calcium (too much milk) is also constipating. Peaches, plums, prunes, and spinach are good dietary remedies for mild constipation.

There are a few very rare medical conditions which may also cause constipation or pain. These include hypothyroidism, celiac disease, and various anatomic abnormalities of the colon, rectum, and anus. We consider testing for these if a child remains constipated despite conscientious correction of dietary causes.

Our recommendations for treatment of constipation are:

- Remove ALL bananas, rice, cheese, and apple products from the child’s diet for at least 1 month.
- Serve the child a fruit (melons, berries, plums, oranges) with every single meal.
- Serve the child at least 1 serving of prunes (dried plums) or 4 ounces of prune juice daily.
- Limit dairy intake to no more than 20 ounces (and no less than 16 ounces) of dairy per day.

If dietary measure don’t take care of the problem within 1 week, start Miralax (available now over the counter) – 1 capful (17 grams) in a glass of liquid every day for 1 month. If this proves to be too helpful (!) you can gradually lower the amount.

Some kids benefit from an initial “clean-out” with 1 or 2 Pediatric Fleet’s enemas.

Your child should be re-evaluated for:

- Abdominal pain associated with fever.
- Severe abdominal distension, vomiting that persists more than 24 hours, or bilious (green) vomit.
- Bloody stools, rectal bleeding, or bloody urine.
- Weight loss or decreased linear (height) velocity
- Persistent or increasing pain in a specific location (not just general belly pain)

Your provider today was: _____________________________________________

Treatments recommended today:

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