DOWN SYNDROME NEW SOUTH WALES
THE Learning EXCHANGE

Constipation Fact Sheet

The digestive system

The stomach: a storage tank for food.

The small intestine: absorbs nutrients.

The large intestine: collects and stores poo until ready to be expelled. But absorbs water from the poo while it is waiting. Not enough water leads to hard poo which causes pain to pass.

When is enough, enough?

Three times per day and up to three times per week is considered healthy. But can be individual. Look at consistency without straining and discomfort is the goal.

What to look for

Colour: a good colour is any shade of brown. Changes in colour are often diet/food related. Red can be beetroot from iron supplements or eating a lot of blueberries. Diet related changes go back to normal quickly.

Some medication can change poo colour.

Colours which may be of concern, that don't go away and have pain associated with them, see a GP for:

- green, infection
- red or tarry black can be bleeding
- yellow, problems with the bile duct
- clay or very light poo can indicate problems with the liver, gall bladder of pancreas.

Bristol stool chart

Used globally, the Bristol stool chart is a great visual for the appearance of poo and what it can mean.



Type 1: Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass) – **Very constipated**



Type 2: Lumpy and sausage like – **Slightly constipated**



Type 3: A sausage shape with cracks in the surface – **Normal**



Type 4: Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft – **Normal**



Type 5: Soft blobs with clear-cut edges – **Lacking fibre**



Type 6: Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool – **Inflammation**



Type 7: Liquid consistency with no solid pieces – **Inflammation**

Constipation is the passage of stool (poo) less than times per week. It is hard to pass, with a change is the size and volume of bowel movements.

What causes it and why is it more common in people with Down syndrome?

Low muscles tone associated with Down Syndrome; abdominal muscles along with pelvic floor muscles are used to push poo through the large intestine efficiently.

Lack of co-ordination between the pelvic floor muscles and the anal sphincter creates the sensation of needing to open bowels without being able to.

The autonomic nervous system (think automatic) which tells us to contact and relax smooth, muscles this includes the movement of the bowel does not function the same way.

The smooth muscle of the bowel is too relaxed, making movement of poo slower, leading to more water being absorbed and a harder poo to push out.

Other factors include: stress, medication changes, bed rest due to illness, less fibre and water in the diet, reduced mobility/ exercise.

Some health conditions can increase the risk of constipation

These include:

- Celiac disease
- Hypothyroidism
- Hirschsprung's disease

What can help

Diet, water, movement, encourage toilet time 15-45 minutes after meals without a rush, a foot stool to straighten the rectum.



Tips and tricks

- **Diet:** hidden vegetables in pastas, and soups, fruit-based desserts.
- **Water intake:** a fancy water bottle or one with measurements to get through the day.
- Exercising with others.
- Talk about bowel habits, it reduces embarrassment and can help you detect potential problems early.
- Use visuals, tick sheets and the Bristol stool chart.
- **Apps:** there are multiple "poo tracker" apps.

See your GP

- A blood test and/or abdominal X-ray can help rule out other causes of constipation.
- Blood on the toilet paper can be haemorrhoids or an anal fissure and causing pain.
- Overflow diarrhoea often looks like thick skid mark in underwear but is watery stool leaking around a hard lump of poo in the rectum.

Your GP can take a history, do a physical examination and discuss alternatives available for constipation management and appropriate laxatives if needed.

Notes

Resources and Services

Continence Health Australia: Easy English Fact Sheets
www.continence.org.au/resources-and-tools/fact-sheets-booklets/?topic=Easy+English

Down Syndrome Australia: Bowel Screening
www.downsyndrome.org.au/resources/health/cancer-screening/bowel-screening/

Statewide Intellectual Disability Health Service
www.health.nsw.gov.au/disability/Pages/Statewide-Intellectual-Disability-Health-Service.aspx

Cleveland Clinic
https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/stool-poop-color

If you are feeling unwell, see your local GP.

If you are experiencing an emergency, call **000**.

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