

ENCOPRESIS

What is Encopresis?

Encopresis is the medical word for the involuntary passage of stool somewhere other than the toilet after the child acquires toilet skills, or after age 4. Other terms for this are “fecal incontinence” or “soiling”.

Constipation is the most common cause of fecal incontinence in children. Other causes can be toilet training problems, stress/anxiety, or an underlying medical condition.

If your doctor determines that no underlying medication condition exists, then this is considered “functional” fecal incontinence. This is more common than you might think. Up to 4% of four year old children and up to 2% of children over the age of seven have this concern.

As mentioned before, constipation is the most common cause: it is present in 4 out of every 5 children that have stooling accidents. This also means that 1 out of 5 children can experience fecal incontinence without constipation.

Constipation and fecal incontinence occur more commonly in children with ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and those with anxiety or depression.

The child often denies signs of soiling in their underwear. Many also have voiding accidents (wetting the bed or even daytime urinary accidents). Stopping incontinence can be very hard and can take a long time so you and your child will need to work together. **Remember that children cannot help their accidents. You should never punish, tease, or get mad at your child for it.**

Assessment

Your doctor can often diagnose the issue with obtaining a history and performing a physical exam. As part of a thorough assessment, a rectal exam may be needed. Your doctor should discuss this with you before assessment.

Most children do not require any additional testing. In some cases an x-ray, blood work or urine tests may be obtained.

Treatment

It is important to know that this is involuntary and the child will not respond to blaming or discipline. Positive reinforcement is key. Encourage a “bathroom routine” regular toileting for a few minutes after every meal.

If the child is constipated, it is important to focus on constipation management (both behavioural and laxative treatment). If the child is not constipated, then similar behavioural strategies are used, but a laxative may not be needed. See our handouts Constipation and Daytime Wetting for more tips and resources on these commonly associated conditions.



It is important to remain patient. This can take several months or longer to improve.

Further Resources

- Video:
“The Poo in You- Constipation and Encopresis Educational Video”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgBj7Mc_4sc