



Functional Constipation, Stool Withholding, and Encopresis

Most childhood constipation involves withholding stool. Many times parents will say that their child is straining to push the stool out. However, children who have had painful bowel movements commonly strain to hold the stool in because they develop a fear of pooping. The classic postures that a child will use to withhold stool include standing very stiffly while holding onto a table or chair, sitting flatly on the floor with their bottom pressed firmly down or crossing their legs straight in front of them. Watch your child for these behaviors. When children take these postures, it means that they have to poop, but they do not want it to come out. Unfortunately, most children cannot overcome their withholding by just talking about it with their parents. Children as young as a few months old or as old as 12 years of age may be withholding stool.

Why do children hold stool in? Most do it because they have experienced pain or have been frightened while trying to poop. If the poops continue to be painful, children respond by trying harder to hold it in. Sometimes children are too busy playing or do not want to use the bathrooms at school. Sometimes teachers ask children to hold it until class is over.

Over time, holding the stool in results in a series of adaptations by the body. The rectum begins to dilate and stretch so it can hold larger amounts of poop. The stools become larger, drier and harder to get out. When the poop comes out, it may cause a small tear in the anus or in the lining of the rectum that may result in bleeding. Parents often see stools that are adult sized or bigger and can clog a toilet. At this point, children often lose the sensation of needing to poop. They may also lose some of the muscle strength needed to push it out. This is why older children might say, "I can't feel it." Children often have less energy, abdominal cramps (that can be quite severe), and lose their appetite when they are full of retained stool.

After a while, holding onto poop and stretching the rectum may lead to **encopresis** (leaking of stool). Encopresis is when a large amount of hard stool is sitting in the rectum and looser, often grainy, stool leaks around and out of the anus. Some people mistake this for diarrhea because children will pass many small stools throughout the day. They will soil their clothes because their rectum is so stretched out that they do not have the urge to stool and they can no longer hold all of it in. This often leads to incredible frustration of the parents, but many children do not seem to be too upset. May parents discipline their children at this point, but remember: the sensation and ability to stool is severely reduced by all of the constipation/withholding, and the child may no longer have voluntary control over accidents.