Faecal incontinence or encopresis

Faecal incontinence is when children who are past the age of toilet training regularly do poos in places other than the toilet. They can’t control when and where the poo comes. It can be very upsetting for children and parents. Faecal incontinence is also called encopresis or soiling.

Causes of faecal incontinence or encopresis

The main cause of faecal incontinence in children is chronic constipation. If your child has been constipated for a long time, he’ll have very hard poo, which gets stuck and stretches his rectum. Your child might lose the urge to go the toilet because his rectum always feels stretched. Then liquid poo might overflow around the old hard, stuck poo, without your child feeling it or meaning to let it go.

Emotional issues, such as stress from premature or forceful toilet training or the birth of a sibling, might also cause faecal incontinence.

Other causes for faecal incontinence include rare neurological disorders and anus abnormalities.

Symptoms of faecal incontinence or encopresis

Faecal incontinence can range from ‘skid marks’ to larger bits of poo in your child’s underwear.

Aside from pooping in places other than the toilet – usually in her underwear – your child might also have symptoms of constipation. These include pain when doing a poo, which can mean she tries to avoid going to the toilet. She might also have tummy pains that come and go, and she might go for long periods between poos.

It’s common for children with faecal incontinence to have behaviour problems, but these usually go away once the soiling improves.

About 30% of children with faecal incontinence also have bedwetting.

All children achieve bowel control at their own rate. Faecal incontinence isn’t generally considered a medical condition unless your child is at least four years of age.

When to see your doctor

You should see your doctor if your child is four years or older and has persistent faecal incontinence or constipation.

Treatment for faecal incontinence or encopresis

The treatment for faecal incontinence depends on the cause of the problem.

If chronic constipation is the main cause, your doctor will help you work out a treatment plan based on laxative medications and establishing good bowel habits.
If your child has behaviour problems associated with faecal incontinence, he might need group or individual psychotherapy. Regardless of how it’s treated, faecal incontinence usually goes away in most children.

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