



Early digestive warning signs might signal a growing problem for your child

By Nancy Ludwig, MS, RDN, LD, Head Start Consulting Nutritionist

Today's topic reviews childhood constipation and the need to raise our children to adults who can make good choices for themselves. In my role as consultant nutritionist to Siletz Tribal Head Start, I offer information for families. Constipation, even occasional, can be an early warning sign about our children's unfolding health and our opportunities to support them.

The articles last July and August focused on constipation and addressed the topic at three levels – foundational habits, short-term interventions and finding the root cause. This month, I step back with an alternative perspective to view constipation as a possible early warning sign that enables us to observe that the body is struggling.

When we can support and train children to notice how they feel and connect that with what they do, and support them to learn to make healthy decisions, they grow into adults with healthy skills.

As I said above, constipation is often a very early warning sign that we need to look deeper into what is going on. This is true at every age.

Let's start with a focus on toddlers who sometimes don't poop. They may "hold it" for a variety of reasons. We must always consider the "why" behind this behavior.

When they hold it, the stool generally becomes hard, making it more difficult to pass and may end up being painful. This pain then reinforces the pattern of holding it. The initial reason may be due to confusing emotions around potty training or a shameful experience of an accident.

Setting the stage where children can experience safety around bowel habits, with communication to help them understand, is important for health later in life. Meanwhile, you may want to soften the stool by offering diluted prune juice or

prunes to chew in order to ease the passage and reduce potential pain, thereby removing a barrier while opening safe communication.

Often children get the idea they should not talk about their bowel habits, especially when they begin to be independent of their parents and care providers in the bathroom. If this occurs, it is difficult for parents to catch these warning signs. Furthermore, when children and adults don't feel comfortable talking, children often suffer without seeking support. This failure to communicate and learn intensifies the negative health consequences.

If our bowels don't move in a timely way, toxins and waste products stay in our bodies, creating an additional burden. Moving the bowels multiple times per day is considered ideal.

Our modern culture has minimized the dangers of not eliminating frequently and in a timely manner. Two to four days between bowel movements is too long and leads to irritation and inflammation, as well as possibly holding onto infection and toxicity.

In an online summit about healthy elimination, I heard Joel Warsh, MD, pediatrician, share that almost all chronic health issues are related to what we eat. He shared some simple points to consider: Buy local food that is right for our genetics. Eat a well-balanced diet, emphasizing fiber, protein and fat. Try to include fruits and vegetables.

Read labels. Make time for family meals. Prepare foods together. Be aware that most people have issues with grains, dairy and sugars. Problems with these foods can lead to health conditions, with the "first warning signs" possibly being slow bowels.

Dr. Warsh also stated that nearly 50% of kids are experiencing chronic disease. Kids are no longer outliving the lifespans of their parents. We must be doing many things that are not ideal.

For example, if you and/or your child have an issue with wheat (such as an

allergy, celiac or gluten sensitivity) and if wheat is consumed every day, many times, the body is required to perform extra work.

At first this chronic, low-level irritation may not be noticeable. This stress adds to the overall burden, however, and takes away from our body's total resources to continue to function. In this way, wheat, when consumed every day by someone who doesn't tolerate it well, is a hidden burden. The body continues to do its best, but over time it cannot manage; immunity weakens and/or digestion is impaired.

Often it seems like changes are sudden, but many things are going on beneath the surface. Frequently, constipation is an early symptom or warning sign. Then other symptoms follow, despite the long history that occurs prior to our awareness.

In addition to food as the foundation for healthy digestion, it is essential to know what healthy gut function feels like. How do you feel when you don't have a bowel movement? How do you feel when you evacuate your bowels every day regularly? How does it feel to have a "big one" when it seems like you be might catching up from missed bowel movements? How do you feel after eating specific foods that may not be ideal?

Many people struggle to get clear about specific problem foods because of the conflict between the comfort and joy of eating them, but feeling worse afterward. It is important that your children learn about these associations to be able to make the personal connection with what they eat, how they feel, plus how often they move their bowels.

Parents may also want to consider the following questions: Are the foods that are not ideal for you the same or different than your children's? Would you guide your children better if you first knew what triggered you? Are you resistant to change? Does this resistance interfere with the changes your children may need to make?

Questioning and observing are vital parts of learning about which foods to

Wear loose-fitting, lightweight, warm layers, rather than one heavy layer of clothing.

Take breaks while shoveling snow – overexertion can bring on a heart attack.

Help firefighters by keeping fire hydrants clear of snow.

eat in order to become healthy adults who are able to look after and provide for themselves without any help from others. A parent's job is to let children become themselves and able to make their own good decisions.

When children are quite young, parents and caregivers need to make the changes for them, as well as be a role model. As children age, they need to participate. You could deprive your children of an important growth experience if you do for them what they can already do or can almost do.

When making changes, start with healthier versions of what your children like, such as organic, non-GMO chips vs. whatever is cheap. Remove problem foods from the house so they are not a temptation.

The foods that are encouraged can be placed in visible locations. By seeing a bowl of fruit, children may warm up to the idea or they may just eat the fruit out of hunger when the previous favorites are not available. Eventually, children may prefer the new snacks.

Consider a kid's cookbook or cooking class. Choose recipes and prepare meals together. Talk about the foods, their attributes and benefits. Let kids help in the kitchen as it will likely increase their willingness to try new healthy foods.

When removing foods like wheat, to test the results make sure any trials with re-introduction are designed to allow children to make the connections with the consequences. i.e. "When I eat this, it may be delicious, but I don't like how I feel later." Our choices always matter.

Siletz Tribal Head Start offers nutritional support at no cost to Head Start families. This usually occurs over the telephone. If you have nutrition concerns about your Head Start child or want to discuss family nutrition concerns, please contact your teacher or the director and ask to speak to the nutritionist.