

Encopresis: You and your child are not alone

It started at the end of preschool. Our daughter, who had been fully potty trained, started wetting her pants at school. Concerned that she may have a urinary tract infection, we took her to our primary care physician. It turns out she was constipated, and the stool was pressing on her bladder, causing her to wet herself. The doctor prescribed an over-the-counter laxative and sent us on our way.

Things were fine until the end of kindergarten. I noticed smears of stool in her underwear and wondered if she was again constipated. We went to the doctor, and our daughter was indeed impacted again. This time, however, things didn't clear up so easily. She began having bowel movements in her pants, refusing to clean up, and sometimes hiding her dirty underwear. Our daughter is now 10 and she is *finally* accident-free. But it has been a long, long road.

What is encopresis?

According to the Mayo Clinic website, encopresis occurs when a child resists having bowel movements, causing impacted stool to collect in the colon and rectum. When a child's colon is full of impacted stool, liquid stool can leak around the impacted stool and out of the anus, staining the child's underwear.

Encopresis usually occurs after age 4, when the child is already potty trained. It is more common in boys than girls. It can occur in teens and adults, as well.

Encopresis is a symptom of chronic constipation. The child's stool is hard and dry and may be painful to pass. As a result, the child avoids going to the toilet, making the problem worse. The longer the stool remains in the colon, the more difficult it is for the child to have a bowel movement. The colon stretches, which may affect the nerves that signal when it's time to go to the toilet. Sometimes children can have daily bowel movements but still have accidents because they have not been fully emptying their colon.

According to the University of Iowa website, encopresis is **not** a behavior problem. It can be triggered by emotional stress, but it is a medical issue. For our daughter, the end of the school years triggered her anxiety. And once she began withholding her stool, the problem got worse and worse.

What are the signs of encopresis?

According to the University of Iowa website, signs of encopresis include:

- Your child often has accidents and stained underwear.
- You can feel a hard mass at one side of your child's stomach.

- Your child says it hurts to have a bowel movement.
- Your child is often too full to eat or vomits after eating.
- Your child frequently plugs the toilet when they have a bowel movement.
- Your child does not have a bowel movement about every other day.

How is encopresis treated?

Encopresis can be cured, but it can take six months to two years or more, according to the UI website. It is imperative to consult with a pediatrician or a pediatric gastroenterologist. They often prescribe stool softeners, laxatives, or enemas.

Other tips include:

- Have your child sit on the toilet for at least five minutes after every meal. Play a board game; let them watch a video. Do whatever it takes to allow them to sit long enough and relax to fully empty their colon.
- If your child's feet do not touch the ground, use a footstool so he or she can push better.
- Never tease or embarrass your child. Do not show anger. While it may seem like purposeful behavior, it is not within a child's control.
- Encourage your child to drink lots of water and eat fiber-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains
- Stick with the program. The relapse rate for encopresis is high. Do not "slack off."
- Consider scheduling therapy if your child feels shame, guilt, depression or low self-esteem related to encopresis.

Where can I get more information?

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- <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/cdd/patients/encopresisguide.asp>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/encopresis/DS00885>