Seek medical help

Make a diary of all your child’s bowel actions and accidents for a couple of weeks and take this with you when you see the doctor.

Provide a comfortable and supported toilet seat and environment.

Punishing children for soiling may make things worse - remember, children may not feel the need to poo, or even be aware of soiling.

What to expect?

The medical practitioner for your child will take a detailed history and feel your child’s tummy and observe the anus.

• Occasionally a blood test may be required
• Laxatives and a toileting program will be started

These will need to be carried out for at least 6–12 months and are best supervised by your doctor or continence professional.

If this doesn’t solve the problem, referral to a paediatrician or paediatric gastroenterologist may be required.

While your child is being treated, the kinder or school needs to be aware of the problem so your child gets the support they need if soiling should occur.

For further assistance on where to get professional help contact the National Continence Helpline

National Continence Helpline
1800 33 00 66
Phone continence nurse advisors for free advice, resources and information about local services.

Continence Foundation of Australia
Level 1, 30–32 Sydney Road
Brunswick VIC 3056
T (03) 9347 2522
F (03) 9380 1233
E info@continence.org.au
W continence.org.au

State Resource Centres
Victoria
T (03) 9816 8266
E info@continencevictoria.org.au

New South Wales
T (02) 8741 5699
E cfansw@optusnet.com.au

Western Australia
T (08) 9386 9777 or
1800 814 925 (WA country callers only)
E info@continencewa.org.au

South Australia
T (08) 8266 5260
E continence@sa.gov.au

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The large bowel is a long muscular tube which moves faeces (poo) towards the anus where it is expelled. The opening of the anus is controlled by muscles which open and close as necessary.

Children usually develop the ability to be toilet trained by about 3 years of age. Even after a child is toilet trained there may be occasional accidents with soiling (poo) in your child’s underwear.

If a child is unable to be toilet trained or has regular poo accidents after the age of 3–4 years, then they should be medically assessed. If a child has been toilet trained and at a later stage starts to soil, this also needs medical assessment.

How many children get soiling?

About 1–3% of children can have this problem and some of them may have wetting as well. It is more common in boys.

Soiling may vary from a ‘skid mark’ to larger amounts that need to be removed from underwear before it can be washed.

In almost all cases soiling happens because the large bowel is not emptying properly and the child is constipated.

Constipation is very common and occurs at some time in up to 25% of children. If it is not recognised and treated, bowel actions may become harder and less frequent.

Over time, stretching of the bowel makes it less sensitive, so the child may not feel when poo needs to come out and so has an accident. It is quite possible that there is hard poo inside the bowel, but the soiling is soft runny poo leaking around the hard mass, and so you don’t realise that constipation is the underlying problem.

How does this cycle happen?

1. Painful bowel actions may lead to the child avoiding pooing.
2. The child may not want to use kinder/school toilets because of privacy or cleanliness issues.
3. The child may not be able to access a toilet when they feel the urge to go.
4. Some children just don’t feel the need to go when they are busy with something else.

Yes, occasionally there is a structural cause of soiling, but these are usually diagnosed at birth or soon after.

There are some conditions where the bowel itself does not squeeze effectively but again these are less likely.

Some food allergies may cause constipation or diarrhoea which leads to soiling, but this is less common also.

Soiling is NOT caused by attention-seeking, naughtiness or laziness, and although it may cause emotional upset, soiling is not usually caused by it.

Children who have poo accidents may appear to be unaware they have happened, or not want to change. This is not a sign of naughtiness or not caring – they are usually very upset deep inside.

The social consequences of soiling are distressing for parents and children. It is important to realise that the problem can be treated and early recognition and effective treatment will minimise the impact it has.