



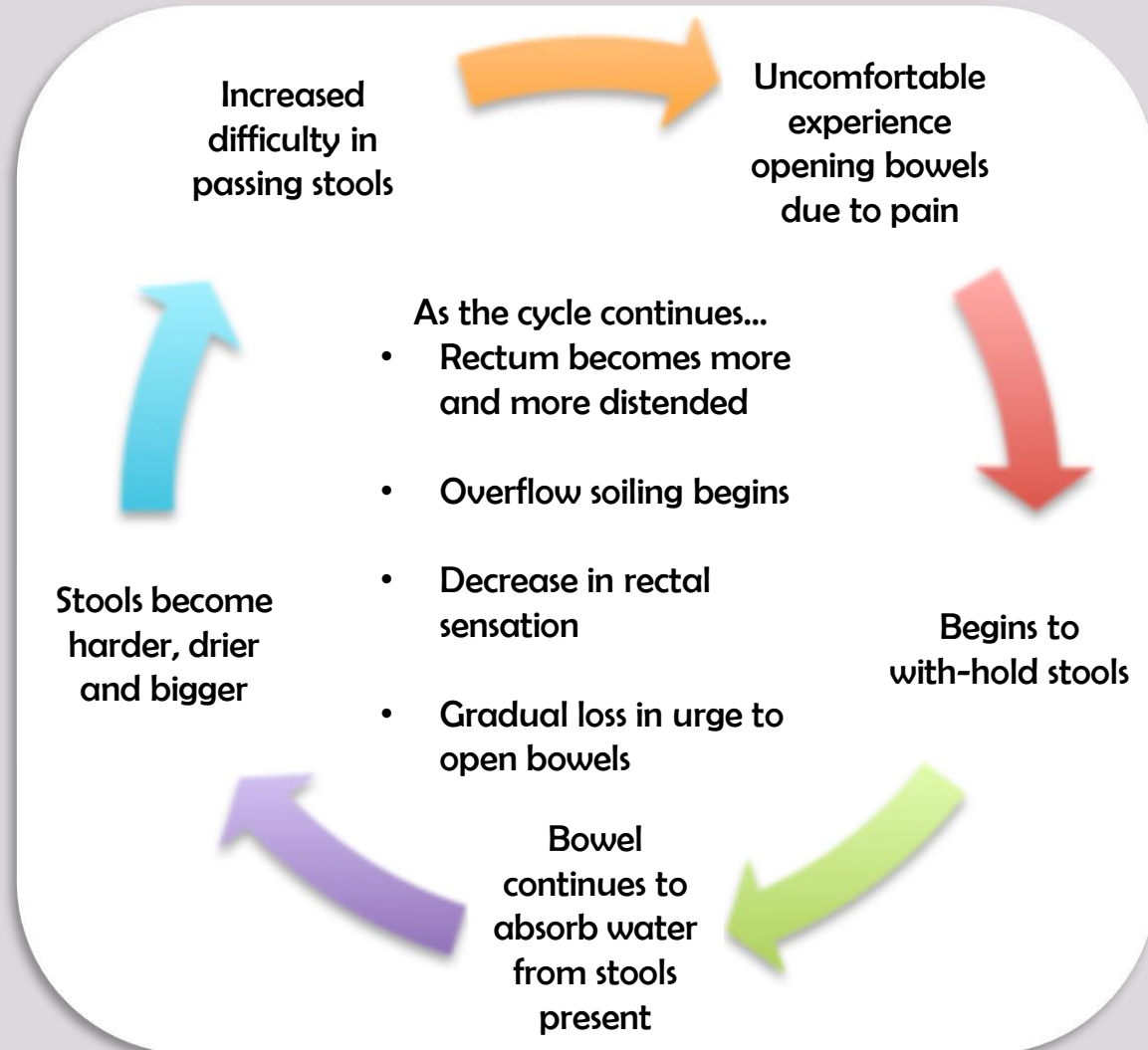
Understanding With-Holding Behaviour

What Is With-Holding?

Stool withholding is when a child will avoid opening their bowels, by using their muscles to stop themselves from having a bowel movement each time they feel an urge to pass a stool.

It can happen for physical and/or psychological reasons, but most typically occurs after a potty-training child has experienced a painful bowel movement and is reluctant to open bowels again as a result. Some children with-hold stools because they are “too busy” playing, or are distracted by something they would rather do. At approximately three years old, children develop the ability to have more complex emotions. They understand the expectations surrounding potty training - no matter how gentle parents are during potty training - and begin to experience embarrassment, anxiety, and even fear around opening their bowels, but they lack the sophisticated language to explain these emotions with words. As a result, they may lie about whether they have opened their bowels, open bowels in ‘secret’ (in corners or behind furniture, for example), or hide soiled underwear. Even though a child is in physical pain from with-holding stools, even crying or complaining of pain, the with-holding behaviour continues. Other symptoms of stool with-holding include a "poo dance" (wiggling, crossing and uncrossing legs, walking on tip-toes), appearing to strain to the point of becoming red in the face, and clenching the buttocks.

With-Holding Cycle



Although a child may have passed stools for months or years without issues, just **ONE** bad experience can cause a child to begin to with-hold.

If a child has experienced a painful bowel motion, they can resist opening their bowels again.

Other With-Holding Triggers Include:

* An illness such as a virus or recent sickness that has led to dehydration. Dry stools are harder and will hurt more to pass.

* Passing a large stool can cause a child's bottom to tear (anal fissure.) This can make opening bowels very uncomfortable and painful. As a result, the child does not want to repeat this, so begins to with-hold.

* Potty training is a common time for children to begin with-holding.

* A change in routine or using unfamiliar toilets away from home can trigger with-holding behaviour.

The diagram shows the viscous cycle of with-holding, and what it can lead to.

Signs of With-Holding Behaviour

- * Asking for a nappy to be put on in order to open bowels
- * Refusal to sit on the toilet/potty
- * Stopping unexpectedly from playing and making facial expressions, such as grimacing
- * Standing on tip toes, rigid, and holding their body in odd positions
- * As it takes effort and concentration to withhold, they may seem vacant or not respond as they usually would
- * Saying “I don’t need a poo” when you can clearly see they need one
- * Seeing smears of stools in underwear
- * Hiding in favourite places, such as behind the sofa when they have the urge to open their bowels
- * Sitting on the toilet and making noises to suggest they are pushing, when actually they are using their muscles to keep their stool in
- * Crouching or sitting when they have an urge to open bowels and then standing quickly to prevent it
- * Opening their bowel through the night. Once asleep, your child can no longer with-hold so may soil during the night.

How to Prevent With-Holding Behaviour

This requires a 2-pronged approach. Firstly, the physical withholding and then the behavioural side effects of being fearful of opening bowels.

Breaking the habit:

- * You must treat the constipation first
- * When your child's stools are reliably soft, you can start working on reassurance and confidence building
- * Your child needs to be relaxed, reassured and comfortable in a toilet setting
- * Your child needs to believe that their stools will not hurt them anymore. This will only happen when they feel it for themselves
- * Stay calm and do not get angry with your child
- * Try to put yourselves in your child's position—it is logical that your child would try to prevent bowels opening if a previous stool has caused them pain

If you think your child's With-Holding behaviour is due to anxiety or fear of the toilet, or you suspect Psychological Issues may be causing them to With-Hold their stools, then ask our team for "Psychological Strategies for Constipation" booklets – we can easily send these to you.