

No Time for Tummy Aches!

By Victoria B. Teague, MD

Each year around the time that school is starting, several children come into our office complaining of stomach aches. Generally, these tummy aches are not accompanied by fever, vomiting, diarrhea, or any other symptoms of illness. When the child is asked where the pain is located, they will usually point to the middle of their abdomen at the belly button. While new onset of abdominal pain can certainly be a reason for concern and warrants a thorough examination by the pediatrician, it is more often due to a benign cause.

First of all, it is important to ascertain that your child is stooling on a regular basis. Many children do not realize the importance of “pooping” every day! With the start of school, their access to bathroom facilities becomes more limited. Bathroom breaks are usually given just before lunch so that the children may also wash their hands prior to entering the cafeteria. However, eating a meal is often what triggers the urge to defecate (known as the “gastrocolic reflex”), so when they really need to go after lunch they are not given the opportunity. This may result in the child holding their bowel movement until after school. By then, the urge to defecate may have subsided and they may wait even longer before going. Thus begins the cycle of childhood constipation – the stools become larger and firmer and may hurt to pass, so the child begins holding them in. With chronic stool withholding, the urge to defecate may no longer occur, due to intestinal muscle laxity, which only perpetuates the cycle. Chronic constipation is treated with stool softeners and behavioral management.

Another common reason for childhood tummy aches is lactose intolerance. Although more common in the African American and Asian populations, lactose intolerance increases in prevalence with age and may develop at any time. Sometimes a stomach virus can trigger temporary lactose intolerance that may last up to several months. Avoidance of dairy products for a week or two can help determine if your child is experiencing this problem.

Lastly, many children experience stomach aches due to emotional stress, such as the anxiety associated with starting a new school year with new friends, new teachers, and new routines. If asked about stressors, most children will say they aren't worried or upset about anything, but deeper digging and closer observation to the timing of the episodes may reveal the culprit. While sometimes the stomach aches are concocted as a form of avoidance behavior, more often they are very real and painful to the child. Once more serious disorders have been ruled out, this psychosomatic abdominal pain is best dealt with by reassurance and supportive care. The child is encouraged to continue with his or her regular activities, with discussion of the tummy aches kept to a minimum, and the problem usually resolves in a few weeks.

If your child experiences recurrent stomach aches, we always recommend a physician evaluation with a thorough examination that may include labs, if deemed appropriate. However, keep in mind that most tummy aches of childhood are benign and do not require extensive testing or treatment.