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March 6, 2024

Learning to Read...Your Stool

Did you know that by doing a quick 'read' of your daily stool, you may learn about your digestive system and bowel health?

The frequency, consistency, and colour of your stool fluctuates depending on your level of hydration, and what you eat or drink. However, if you observe an unusual shape and colour that persists for a longer period of time – with or without other symptoms such as abdominal cramping or pain – it may signal health concerns that you should discuss with your healthcare provider.

What to Expect with Healthy Feces

Ideally, stools should be some shade of brown and be excreted with little strain or discomfort, somewhat soft like a banana.

Physicians consider it 'regular' to have two healthy bowel movements a day. This is usually a good indication that the digestive system is working well. Some people go up to three times a day, to once every three days. Any of these patterns are fine and will vary per person. Most folks have a regular pattern, and go around the same time of day, the same number of times a week.

Consistency

When you examine your next stool, compare your bowl findings to this [Bristol Stool Chart](#).

Type 1 and 2

These textures are indications that you are constipated, which can lead to several health problems if left untreated. To avoid these uncomfortable bathroom visits, make sure you are eating foods with lots of water and drinking six to eight glasses of water a day. If there is no change and you remain constipated, speak to your physician or pharmacist about over-the-counter options to help move things along. If the problem persists, make an appointment with your doctor.

Type 3 and 4: Ideally, this is where we would like our excretions to align on the Bristol Stool Chart. These healthy stools are soft and easy to pass.

Type 5, 6, and 7:

These excretions fall into the diarrhea range. Type 5 is not usually cause for alarm but can be an indication that you need more fibre in your diet. Fibre both softens and bonds, and is a critical component of our diet.

Type 6 often means we have a bug in our system. It can also indicate high stress or dietary issues.

Type 7 has no solid matter at all. If you are consistently in this range, this is cause for concern; prolonged diarrhea can lead to dehydration, which is very dangerous to your health. See your physician.

Make an appointment with your physician if your stools are consistently thin or pencil-like, loose or watery, or accompanied by mucus or pus.

Colour

Colour coding your waste can be tricky, as the colour will be influenced by the things we eat – note the 'reddish' hue the day after we eat beets!

However, if your stool colour is anything other than a classic, milk chocolate, brown tone for any length of time, this may be an indication that further investigation by a healthcare professional is in order. The Canadian Digestive Health Foundation provides this [overview interpretation](#) of the following stool colours:

- **Green**
- **White or Clay**
- **Yellow**

- **Black**
- **Red**

Remember, if your toilet bowl inspection shows a different colour stool than normal, there is no need to immediately panic. Review what you have consumed the past few days to see if that relates to the change in colour. But, if something is not right, make an appointment with your doctor.

Weekly Reading Material

At least once a week, *read before you flush!*

Monitor frequency, consistency, and colour regularly so that you can quickly note any changes and seek medical attention to address any serious health concerns.

If you deviate once in a while from your regular pattern of bowel movement frequency (such as when you travel) there is likely no reason to be concerned. However, if you are suddenly missing your bowel movements or – alternatively – you are in the toilet all day, this may indicate something is amiss, and you should contact your physician.

Be proactive in supporting your digestive system health by:

- Keeping yourself hydrated
- Eating lots of vegetables, fruits, and whole-grain fibre-rich foods
- Eating foods rich in probiotics (yogurt, and pickled foods such as kimchi, sauerkraut, and kefir)
- Move more to maintain a healthy body weight which wards off digestive systems issues
- Manage stress
- Get help for issues like anxiety and depression, as mood and your digestive system health – such as irritable bowel syndrome – are closely linked via the brain-gut connection.

And when in doubt, consult your medical professional.

Sources:

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/your-digestive-system-5-ways-to-support-gut-health>

<https://www.goodrx.com/well-being/gut-health/bristol-stool-chart>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/stool-color/expert-answers/faq-20058080>

<https://cdhf.ca/en/is-my-poop-healthy-normal/>

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/healthy-and-unhealthy-stool-89211>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

Member Health & Well-Being, Director

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.