

### What is a Normal Stool?



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A normal stool is well formed. This means that stools:

- Are neither too hard, nor too soft
- Are flexible and easy to pass without straining
- Are passed at least once every two to three days
- Have good volume and weight
- Measure about 1½ inches in diameter and about 4-7 inches in length
- Make a clean exit from the body
- Hold cylindrical shape after exiting the body
- Are various shades of brown, greenish in hue with the consumption of some foods

Loosely formed stools, watery stools, pencil thin stools, pellet like stools, dry or hard stools, putty like stools or an inability to move the bowel without interventions (such as a laxative, suppository or enema) are some indicators that stools are not being formed properly.

#### **What is needed for normal stool formation?**

Dietary fiber, fluids, muscular activity, healthy intestinal bacteria, a healthy colon lining and speedy stool transit time are needed for good stool formation. These elements work together to produce stools of good texture, volume, and weight that are soft, flexible and easy to pass (without straining). A prompt response to "Mother Nature" ensures this outcome.

#### **What is a stool made from?**

Stools are formed from feces. Feces are the particles of waste matter that are left over after the body has processed and absorbed nutrients from the foods we eat.

Feces contain water, dietary fiber, inorganic salts, dead cells, bacteria, and anything the body cannot or will not absorb.

Dietary fiber and water are significant ingredients in a stool. Together, fiber and water create the quality, mass and volume of a stool. Insoluble fibers increase the volume of a stool and help to retain water in the stool. This water retaining component helps the stool to counter the water extracting action of the colon. Soluble fibers are fermented into a gel that becomes incorporated into the stool. This gel makes stools soft, flexible and easy to pass.

#### **How often should I move my bowels?**

Move your bowels as soon as possible when "Mother Nature" urges you. Often, this "urge" will occur about thirty to forty-five minutes after eating. This is due to activity that is generated in the gastrointestinal tract when food enters the stomach.

Individual bowel function is unique. Some individuals will move their bowels every day, even several times a day, while others will move their bowels once every three days. This is normal. Frequency of bowel activity can slow down due to the aging process.

#### **What happens if I don't move my bowels?**

When the "urge" to move your bowels is ignored, stools are retained in the colon. The colon extracts additional water from the retained stools causing them to dry out and harden. This makes the stools more difficult to pass. This is constipation.

The rectal sack is flexible. It can stretch out to accommodate stools, prior to elimination, or, to retain them, when stools are intentionally withheld. Over time, if stools are repeatedly withheld, the sack can lose its ability to spring back to its original size after stools are eliminated. This is a problem because it is the presence of stools that stimulates the "urge" to go. When the sack becomes enlarged from being frequently stretched out the "urge" will not be triggered quickly as it once was.

With an enlarged rectal sack, more and more stools are required to fill it before this "urge" is triggered. This means that ...

### What happens if I don't move my bowels? (continued)...

...stools that would otherwise be eliminated, collect in the rectal sack becoming dried out and hard. These stools are difficult to pass. This can result in problems with *chronic* constipation.

In addition to enlarging the rectal sack, and causing chronic constipation, long term neglect of the defecation reflex (the "urge" ) can cause it to fail to function. This can lead to impaction. Impaction requires immediate medical attention.

### What are the factors that may negatively influence normal stool formation?

- ◆ **Low dietary fiber intake:** animal products such as meat, eggs, milk and firm cheese do not contain fiber. Many instant foods such as instant puddings, soups; some highly refined foods such as frozen dinners, fast foods, peanut butter; some instant beverages such as cocoa, flavored coffee drinks, imitation creamers are low in dietary fiber. Without fiber, stools are not well formed.
- ◆ **Inadequate fluid intake:** not drinking an adequate amount of fluids each day, use of diuretics, and being dehydrated will result in poorly formed stools.
- ◆ **Lack of daily exercise:** a sedentary lifestyle, prolonged bed rest from depression or chronic fatigue, or confinement to bed during recovery from illness, injury or Surgery can weaken abdominal and intestinal muscles. This causes slow intestinal motility which results in constipation as stools remain too long in the colon becoming dried out.

- ◆ **Stool Withholding:** Ignoring "Mother Nature" often occurs due to an aversion to the use of public restrooms, the wish to not interrupt play time or work, and not taking restroom breaks when the "urge" hits. Withholding stools causes them to dry out and harden, making them difficult to pass. These are not well formed stools.

- ◆ **Some Medications:** anti-anxiety, opioids, anti-depressants, anticholinergics, blood pressure and cholesterol lowering drugs, and more) some over the counter medications and health supplements (such as iron, calcium, antihistamines, antacids, pain relievers and more) can affect stool formation for a number of reasons.

- ◆ **Some Lifestyle and Life Choices:** Pregnancy, stress, anxiety, nervousness, fear, travel (especially by airplane), smoking, and alcohol can affect the sensitive G.I. tract interrupting normal colon function and affecting regularity.

- ◆ **Some Disease & Illness:** In addition to diseases of the gastro intestinal tract, the presence of, or treatment for, many other chronic illnesses can affect the G.I. Tract such as A.I.D.S., M.S., A.L.S., Cancer, and Parkinson's disease to name a few.

*Article by Carole Engel  
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