

# How Often Should You Poop?

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › How often you empty your bowels can be a good indication of how healthy you are and whether or not your body is running like the well-oiled machine it's intended to be
- › Ninety-eight percent of the participants in one study had a bowel movement frequency ranging from three times weekly to three times daily; both ends of the spectrum were considered normal
- › Sitting can inhibit how completely you're able to get rid of waste, while squatting so your knees are closer to your chest is a more natural arrangement of the body to optimize elimination
- › While scientists aren't sure how people respond to certain sensory stimuli, environmental cues and a feeling of safety could prompt people to poop only when they're at home

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Yes, there really are standards for how often a person should be visiting the porcelain throne. Of course, nearly everyone is thrown off their game from time to time, but generally speaking, there's a few telling criteria regarding this most private of events.

How often it's done is joined by several other aspects of what constitutes a healthy "evacuation" schedule. Points to ponder include not just what's normal and abnormal, but how much is too much or too little? What might affect how often you go? Perhaps most important of all might be the question of what you can do to be more regular.

In fact, how often you empty your innards can be a good indication of how healthy you are and whether or not your body really is running like the well-oiled machine it's intended to be. Many more people are concerned about these questions than one might think, but uneasiness and even fear about what certain signs and symptoms might mean often go unaddressed due to embarrassment, even with their doctors and close family members.

The process of elimination is your body's way of ridding itself of undigested food and waste it doesn't need, which is why "regularity" is a by-word for health. Irregularity can affect your emotional state, how well your brain processes information, cause skin breakouts and bloating, and prevent your body from absorbing nutrients.

## **How Often Should You Make a Deposit Into the Porcelain Bank?**

Of course, everyone is different. The question of what's normal and healthy for a 21-year-old student compared to a 41-year-old commercial fisherman or a 71-year-old knitting fanatic is one that involves diet, lifestyle and a few other factors. However, in one study,<sup>1</sup> researchers found that 98% of their 268 participants had a bowel movement frequency ranging from three times weekly to three times daily. Both ends of the spectrum were considered normal.

Further, instances of urgency, straining and incomplete evacuation can also be normal; age differences didn't seem to be a factor. That said, Medical News Today<sup>2</sup> confronts some of the most common and thought-provoking aspects of proper elimination, including:

- Doctors often see frequency and consistency as indicators of a person's health.
- Generally speaking, most people retain the same bathroom habits, visiting the facilities at about the same frequency and at about the same time of day.
- Temporary changes in the frequency of bowel movements are normal and can coincide with eating unfamiliar food, undergoing stress and many other factors.

- Significant deviations from the "norm" may be an indication of a problem in your stomach or colon.

According to Perfect Origins,<sup>3</sup> depending on your height, age and diet, you could be carrying around anywhere from 5 to 20 pounds of fecal matter in your intestines at any given time. Failure to get rid of waste at "regular" intervals can cause or exacerbate:

|               |                          |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| Upset stomach | Heartburn                |
| Excess gas    | Constipation             |
| Diarrhea      | Irritable bowel syndrome |
| Insomnia      | Mood swings              |
| Skin problems | Allergies                |

## How the 'Elimination Process' Works – or Doesn't

Pooping is the last order of business in digestion. When you swallow your food, the muscles of your esophagus begin contracting and relaxing in a process known as peristalsis, moving the food to your stomach. There, your food gets broken up, and the secretion of gastric juices keeps things moving. The next steps are through the small intestines, liver and large intestines. Kids Health explains:

*"After most of the nutrients are removed from the food mixture there is waste left over – stuff your body can't use. This stuff needs to be passed out of the body. Can you guess where it ends up? Well, here's a hint: It goes out with a flush.*

*Before it goes, it passes through the part of the large intestine called the colon, which is where the body gets its last chance to absorb the water and some minerals into the blood. As the water leaves the waste product, what's left gets harder and harder as it keeps moving along, until it becomes a solid."*<sup>4</sup>

A number of factors can halt the process, leading to constipation, or speed it up and make it painful and watery, aka diarrhea. Your diet and lifestyle choices have a huge impact on the way your body rids itself of unnecessary matter. These include:

The amount of fiber you eat, as a healthy amount helps your schedule stay regular

Adherence to routine, as traveling and frequent changes can influence your "ease" in eliminating

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Exercise or lack thereof, as activity helps your colon work better

The amount of liquids you drink, as deficient water intake can make it more difficult to eliminate

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Medications such as antacids, opiates and antidepressants, as they can cause constipation

Frequent use of laxatives, as it's linked to heart disease, stroke<sup>5</sup> and, ironically, constipation

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Poor nutrition, as an absence of vital vitamins and minerals can adversely affect regularity

Taking iron supplements, as they may promote constipation

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Hormones, including progesterone and estrogen, which can affect elimination frequency

Medical conditions like Crohn's disease, colitis or even the flu, which can change how often you poop

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## How You Eat Is Directly Related to How You Poop

What you eat or don't eat has a big impact on how your digestive system works. Eating plenty of fiber-rich vegetables is an important way to help ensure regularity, and at the same time, grains contain antinutrients as well as sticky proteins like gluten that can cause constipation and, worse, may contain lectins that can lead to worse problems, such as [leaky gut](#). Processed foods are harmful to even the healthiest colon. Perfect Origins lists its own "worst of the worst:"

*"Pepsi and Coke. Greasy [CAFO] burgers and fries. Pizza. Fried chicken. Sugary drinks from your neighborhood Starbucks. They're loaded with artificial ingredients: hard-to-pronounce chemical agents like pyridoxine hydrochloride, sucralose and dipotassium phosphate.*

*They're low in fiber. So they sit in your gut for days. Weeks. And can lead to severe constipation. These ultra-processed foods aren't found in nature. They're cooked up in labs run by mega-rich food companies. And they slam the brakes on your body's natural ability to digest and eliminate waste."<sup>6</sup>*

## **How Well You Poop May Be Related to Your Position When You Poop**

You may never have given it a thought, but before toilets came along, and definitely in earlier eras and certain geographical areas of the world today, people used a completely different set of muscles when they prepared to poop. Unfortunately, in today's modern world, one reason elderly people enter nursing homes is because their leg muscles are too weak for them to stand after using the toilet.

Today, more people than ever are sitting to empty their bowels as opposed to getting into a squatting position. However, sitting can inhibit how completely you're able to get rid of waste. Experts say sitting actually impedes your body's ability to eliminate everything inside your colon that needs to come out.

In most places in the world, squatting so that your knees are closer to your chest as opposed to perpendicular (at a 90-degree angle) is still the natural arrangement of the body to optimize elimination.

It does a better job of straightening the position of your rectum, which helps free up your bowels. Squatting may also help prevent hemorrhoids, as well as bowel diseases, evidenced by the lower incidence of several digestive and bowel-related disorders in undeveloped countries. Squatting on a regular basis to go to the bathroom also helps

keep your leg muscles strong, automatically improving your balance and ability to walk without assistance.

## **Why It's Easier at Home**

You may have noticed it yourself – that your toilet time doesn't seem quite as satisfactory when you're away from home, but the minute you walk into your own humble abode, the urge to let it all out hits you – finally. It also happens frequently upon arriving home after a trip.

Why is that? Nick Haslam, psychology professor at the University of Melbourne and author of "Psychology in the Bathroom," told The Atlantic it even occurs when you've been suffering from constipation. It's just such a relief to finally be in your own surroundings. He added:

*"Most people feel more comfortable going to the bathroom in familiar – and private – surroundings. In my view the experience of 'unburdening' upon returning from a trip is largely a Pavlovian response: The home is a safety signal, signifying that this is the right place to go. If there has been any inhibition or retention at all during the trip, the relaxation response is likely to kick in when you come home."<sup>7</sup>*

Two more factors might play into this phenomenon: Eating unfamiliar foods away from home sometimes has an unsettling effect on your colon, and those foods may also have the added consequence of passing along unfamiliar bacteria, which may help throw your microbiome into clamp mode until you cross your own threshold.

## **Returning to the 'Comfort of Home' a Poop Prompter**

Jack Gilbert, professor of surgery and director of the University of Chicago's The Microbiome Center, allows that to simply say one feels "more comfortable pooping at home" is a little more complicated. He maintains that "All you're doing, when you try to recall something, is triggering sensory simulacra of that experience."<sup>8</sup>

Like someone whose urge to smoke is triggered by a familiar string of actions like getting into the driver's seat, putting on the seat belt, starting the car and then patting their breast pocket for their pack of cigarettes, the familiarity of home triggers sensory impulses like an urge to use the bathroom. Similarly, the familiar routine of opening your door, putting your day's accoutrements on the hall table and kicking off your shoes may then trigger a "bathroom" response. Gilbert explains:

*"More comfortable' is an emotional state, but emotions are physiological responses. So 'more comfortable' is a physiological state. It's a way in which your body responds to its environment. When you get back into your home, your glucose tolerance will change.*

*Your adrenaline pumping will change, and the energy sensors of your muscles will change, altering your actual respiration, how much energy you burn, and how much fat you deposit. When you get back into your home your sleep patterns will change, because the hormones that control sleep will be altered. All of these factors influence how quickly food moves through your gut."<sup>9</sup>*

While scientists aren't really sure how people's bodies respond to certain sensory stimuli, they just know it does. If environmental cues and a feeling of safety could prompt people to poop, Gilbert says he's fairly sure he could train people to have the urge to pee whenever they smell peppermint.

## **When to Seek Help and What You Can Do for Poop Problems**

There are certain signs when using the restroom that may be an indicator that seeking medical help or at least advice may be in order. Vomiting blood or finding blood in your stool are two of them. Other problems may require medical advice, including:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Weight loss that accompanies diarrhea or constipation
- Black, "tarry"-colored poop

- A new onset of pencil-thin poop
- Presence of a substance that looks like coffee grounds in your stool

However, many problems are often easily remedied, such as hemorrhoids, constipation or diarrhea. Loose, watery stools that recur for several days and especially weeks could be sapping your body of electrolytes. Three of the most effective ways to keep your colon as well as your elimination capabilities as "flush" as possible are:

- Regular exercise
- Eating a [diet based on real, whole foods](#) with plenty of fiber
- Taking in the right amount of water for your height and weight and activity level

Staying in tune with what your body is telling you is an important way to maintain health. And sometimes what you get rid of is more important than what you keep.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1</sup> [Scand J Gastroenterol. 2010 May;45\(5\):556-66](#)
- <sup>2</sup> [Medical News Today November 1, 2017](#)
- <sup>3, 6</sup> [Perfect Origins June 7, 2016](#)
- <sup>4</sup> [KidsHealth 1995-2024](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [J Epidemiol. 2016; 26\(5\): 242–248](#)
- <sup>7, 8, 9</sup> [The Atlantic November 1, 2017](#)