

Bowel Habits...the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

That's right! We're going to talk about bowel habits. As a practicing Chiropractic physician specializing in nutrition and weight-loss, with every new patient examination, I ask my patient the question "How many bowel movements do you have each day?" Typically, that's when I get "the look!" Oh my gosh, he wants to talk about: my poop, BM, number 2 or whatever they call their daily constitutional. All of these terms mean the same thing; their bowel contents or feces. **Bowel movements play an important role in our health, filtering what the body cannot use, or no longer needs, by releasing it from our systems.** I commonly ask the question several ways to be clearly understood because this information is important. If I can't communicate with my patients – I can't help them! And I really want to help them with every aspect of their health improvement.

For most individuals, healthy bowel activity is considered 2-3 movements of moderate size every day. Think of the quantity of food consumed each day at breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus snacks. What goes in must come out. If you eat at approximately the same time(s) each day, then bowel movements should also be expected to follow at relatively similar time(s); generally 6-12 hours after consumption and digestion are complete. Unfortunately, for a surprising number of individuals, regular bowel movements are not the case, leading to irregularity, and oftentimes signaling greater health concerns. For some folks, a bowel movement every other day or once or twice a week common. Remember... common doesn't mean acceptable or normal. **This infrequency of bowel movements can harm you because the bowel contents release toxins back into the body through the mucous membranes of the intestines (inner linings of the bowel).** You've got to keep that bowel waste moving! If you don't...is it any wonder that a constipated person feels... HOW? That's right! They feel grumpy, sluggish, bloated, nauseated and all over rotten. Some studies show that appendicitis, colon cancer, hiatal hernia, diabetes and even heart disease may be related to the foods we do or do not eat and how food consumption affects the quality and frequency of bowel movements.

Normal bowel movements not only improve the quality of a person's life, they help prevent several common diseases such as: diverticulitis, fecal impaction and an uncomfortable condition called hemorrhoids. It's common that many individuals suffering with irregularity and only occasional bowel movements are familiar with hemorrhoids. **The longer stool sits in the rectum, (the bottom part of your large intestines) the more water the rectum will absorb from it making it hard and difficult to pass; leading to the formation of painful hemorrhoids.** Sometimes constipation can lead to bowel impaction. Essentially, this means the rectum has a mass of feces which is just too large to pass. Fecal impaction results from poor bowel habits, a diet with too little liquid and fiber, and often too much protein and inadequate physical activity. **If you are having difficulty passing hard impacted stools, it is an indication that, at minimum, you need more water in your diet.**

There is usually a time of day when bowel movements are most likely to occur. Considering they are closely associated with dietary habits and eating patterns; it's wise to anticipate this time and respond to the "urge". Often, you may participate in activities that actually stimulate a bowel movement. **Remember... it's important to recognize the need to defecate and to respond right away to that need.** For many... the urge to have a bowel movement is often strongest in the morning. Upon awakening, just getting up can trigger movement in the large intestine. **Often, the stomach also sends a signal for the bowel to empty when it expands after a meal. This is called the gastro colic reflex and is the reason many individuals and especially children need to use the bathroom soon after eating a meal.** This reflex typically gets weaker with age and is one reason constipation problems occur more in adults rather than children.

The desire to have consistent bowel movements can influence individuals to use other sources, such as laxatives to improve bowel movements. I have witnessed a remarkable increase in the almost daily use of laxatives over the past 10 years. It seems that some patients are convinced they need a daily laxative and are actually afraid not to use them. Daily or frequent use of laxatives can be habit forming, not to mention not necessary in order to produce regularity. Please realize... it takes time for a change in diet to affect the bowels and more time for the bowel to be retrained to function in a normal rhythmic pattern. **To avoid constipation and the ill effects that occur from it, consistent bowel movements are necessary. Natural remedies such as adding more fiber/bulk into the diet, exercising more and increasing water consumption can yield great rewards without the need for over the counter solutions.** There are a variety of food

additives that you could use; yet, just eating more raw vegetables and fruits would be beneficial. Remember that your diet plays a huge role in improving bowel function, and consuming 25 to 30 grams of fiber daily along with regular exercise will pay off by stimulating the bowel to function rhythmically.

A situation completely the opposite of constipation is fecal incontinence (diarrhea which is uncontrollable). **It is my personal and professional opinion that this type of situation should be dealt with by your internist or a gastroenterologist as soon as possible.** Alternating bouts of diarrhea and constipation can be caused by irritable bowel syndrome, food allergies, emotional stress and, for some people, eating red meat, spices, heavy sugar intake, alcohol, and a lack of fiber. Often, individuals with chronic bouts of diarrhea and with irritable bowel syndrome; upon stool testing, will be found to have a bowel parasite. Various herbal formulations can do a remarkably good job in clearing up these cases and are effective as well for chronic diarrhea. There can even be slight air or bubbles within your stool which indicates that you could have a gut or flora imbalance and have gas producing bacteria that are overgrown and competing with the healthier flora within your bowel. The occurrence of horrible foul smelling stools often means you either have too much protein in your diet or a flora imbalance in your gut. If you have noticeable, bright, red blood with your stool, it could be a sign of hemorrhoids, colitis, Crohn's disease, irritable bowel syndrome, colon cancer or can be caused from hard impacted stool passing through the rectum. If your stools are black or tarry looking – this can mean that there is bleeding from within the small intestine. This type of stool often has a very distinctive bad odor. Extremely light green stools are usually associated with too much sugar, fruits or vegetables or not enough grains. A lot of mucous with your stools can reveal diverticulitis or a gut inflammation due to allergies or parasites. If your small intestine is not functioning properly and not really releasing enough digestive enzymes it will often produce oily or greasy looking stools that usually float. If your gallbladder is not working right and you're not digesting dietary fat; this also can produce stools that float.

One simple thing to look for in a bowel movement is color. After a short course of observation over a period of several days, you'll notice that there tends to be a consistency in color of stools unless you've rapidly changed what you've been eating. A change in the type of food you're eating will produce a change in the color of your feces. If you've eaten a lot of corn, blueberries or red beets, I assure you, you'll notice a difference in the color. Pure and simply, just being aware that you should look at your poop is helpful in order for you to notice stool color change. Correlating stool color with your recent diet makes you that much more aware of your dietary intake.

Normal stool/fecal material contains about 1 percent fat. When this percentage increases to about 7 percent – the stool will look oily, greasy and can float. As previously mentioned, certain foods you ingest can create color change. Extremely red stools could be from the ingestion of red beets especially those not overly cooked and very dark stools can be from too much red wine. Blueberries, Pepto Bismol (the bismuth in it), and an over-ingestion of iron pills can also be responsible for dark stools.

Your daily diet intake should include large amounts of liquids and bulk foods to facilitate healthy bowel movements. Everyone should drink 2-3 quarts of liquid every day, preferably water. **Unrefined foods such as: oat bran, wheat bran, brown rice, green vegetables, apples, pears and raw vegetables in and of themselves are examples of a very high residue, high fiber food which helps in having a healthy bowel movement.** It's very important to routinely look at your bowel movements! Fecal material can reveal a lot about your health if you just take a moment to look in the commode and read the signs. Let's face it... bowel movements follow food consumption! A patient following our “**Healthy Life by Design**” program will be amazed at the volume of bowel movements they have once they've been on our healthy eating program for several weeks. A healthy, normal functioning body is going to have frequent bowel movements. It's a fact – so **let's maximize our awareness of what a healthy functioning bowel should be and what it should do.** It's unfortunate that in our society we seem unable to talk about it (poop) without embarrassment.

Another aspect of a healthy bowel rhythm is literally a healthy lower intestine. **There should be billions of beneficial intestinal bacteria or micro flora in your large bowel.** Most of these bacteria are lactobacillus acidophilus and lactobacillus bifidus strains. One of the more common ways of acquiring them is by transfer through breast milk when breast feeding a newborn infant. The body uses lactobacillus in the final stages of digestion and reproduces them as necessary to keep functional harmony within the body. There are many readily available forms of beneficial bacteria supplements on the market today.

When bad bacteria over populate the gut and the good bacteria are not able to keep up, a gut flora imbalance results and symptoms of gas, diarrhea and/or bloating pain result. Certainly, this can be an uncomfortable condition. The same symptoms can occur in an individual who has Candidiasis, an over-yeast production. We'll save that topic for a future article! Irritable bowel syndrome and Crohn's can both create the aforementioned symptoms. Unfortunately, too often the imbalance of the intestinal bacteria is diagnosed later rather than earlier in the condition and that prolongs the overall problem and lengthens the healing process. Early warning signs can include headaches, skin infections, generalized malaise or weakness and constipation can also be symptoms of depleted intestinal bacteria.

What causes a gut flora imbalance? Unfortunately, a high percentage of what most North Americans eat, especially the high amounts of sugar, can cause an imbalance. There is also destruction of the bowel flora due to the toxins in prescribed drugs such as antibiotics and narcotics. An episode of severe diarrhea can damage or destroy beneficial bacteria, as can the use of frequent enemas especially if it's chlorinated water being used with the enema. Fasting can also deplete the beneficial bacteria because of the large quantities of toxins that are dumped from the lymph glands into the colon during the fast. For some individuals on a particular fast, the absence of food that the good bacteria thrive on creates a gut flora imbalance. **To reestablish intestinal bacteria, you could take L. Acidophilus and L. Bifidus with your foods. Eating active plain yogurt may help and a variety of other whole food supplements are available to aide in this process.**

Getting to the bottom of any bowel pattern inconsistency is important. No pun intended! Please remember... anyone who has symptoms of constipation, bloating, irritable bowel or inflammatory bowel disease knows what misery these conditions can cause. Although a variety of pharmaceutical treatments for these conditions are available – I think it prudent to consider a more natural approach to healing; one based on an anti-fungal diet, immune boosting and pain relieving supplements. Learning how to make better food choices and incorporating stress releasing techniques are part of the therapy. **Remember, symptoms can be reduced and conditions reversed naturally for many, many people.**

You are in charge of your health. By assuming responsibility for your own health and through education and improved awareness of one of the most normal of bodily functions... your bowel movements; you have a much better chance of creating the state of improved health that you desire. Consuming a healthy, balanced diet, and engaging in regular exercise are mainstay methods that will help regulate your bowel movements and help you avoid some of the ailments and illnesses mentioned in this article. Regular check-ups with your physician(s) are part of being in charge of your health. So, remember the next time you get up from the commode – stop, look down and see for your self what you delivered. You just may be surprised and inspired to make positive changes.

When an alternative approach to the ongoing usage of medication just to relieve symptoms is desired – our “Healthy Life by Design” program for restoring the body's physiology and healthy function should be a consideration. For additional information see us on the web at: www.naturalwellnesscentre.net. This article is authored by Dr. James R. Grilliot, a chiropractic physician and director of Natural Wellness Centre; phone number: 740-687-0279.