

THE BOTTOM LINE

How your poo can tell you a lot about your health

Did you know that what's in the toilet can tell you a lot about what's going on inside your body? People's bowel habits vary widely – for some it's normal to poo several times a day, while others may go days between motions. Perhaps you've noticed your poo has been different after eating a certain type of food? Or you've found yourself running to the loo before a stressful or exciting event like a drama performance or exam? Travel can also affect bowel habits and things can be different when you go on holiday.

The key is knowing what's normal for you, and not being afraid to speak up if something changes. Dr Suzie Edge, from the Scottish Highlands, is a medical doctor and author of *Poo Through the Ages*. She explains: 'What's coming out

of your body can tell you so much about your health. It's a regular output that you can see and it reveals a lot about what's going on inside you.'

What should your poo look like?

The appearance of poo varies, and again, different people will have a different experience. The Bristol Stool Chart has been used by doctors and health professionals since 1997 as a universal guide to the different shapes, sizes and consistencies of poo, and can be found easily online. It goes from 1–7, with 1 being the hardest, possibly difficult to pass, and 7 being liquid diarrhoea. The key is getting to know what's normal for you.

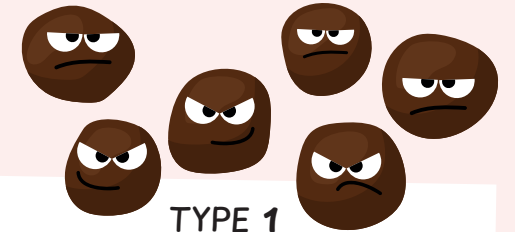
Dr Suzie says: 'There is a spectrum of normal, and that's cool, but if you are normally a 3 or 4, and suddenly you change to a 1, that's something to be aware of.'

Frequency can also vary. 'For some people,' says Dr Suzie, 'constipation might mean they haven't been for a few days, for others it might mean they haven't been today.'

Why might it change?

Changes to your lifestyle and eating habits can cause changes to your poo. If you eat sweetcorn you're likely to see it reappear in the toilet because the casing of the corn kernels are too tough to digest, and if you eat beetroot then your poo may well be pink or red the following day.

BRISTOL STOOL CHART



TYPE 1
Separate hard lumps



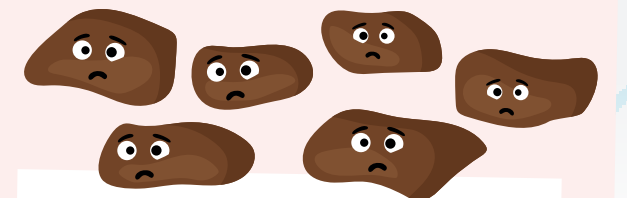
TYPE 2
Sausage-shaped and lumpy



TYPE 3
Sausage-shaped with cracks in the surface



TYPE 4
Smooth and soft sausage



TYPE 5
Soft blobs with clear-cut edges



TYPE 6
Mushy consistency with ragged edgess



TYPE 7
Liquid consistency with no solid pieces



A sudden change in the amount of fibre in your diet can also mean your poo is different in appearance or frequency, and beans can indeed cause gas or bloating if your digestive system isn't used to them.

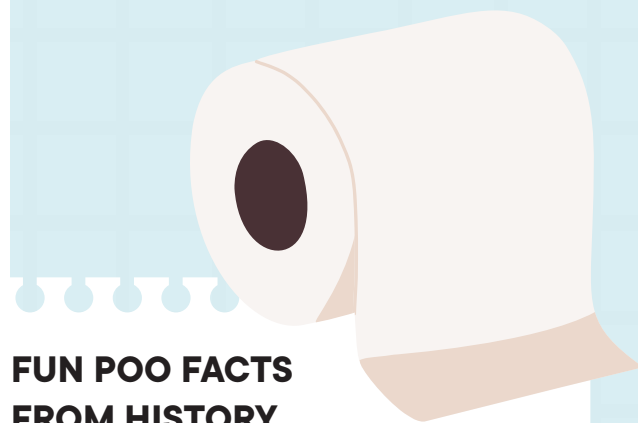
Bowel habits can also be influenced by what's going on with your emotions. Dr Suzie calls it the 'pre-match nerves' when she has to run to the bathroom before a rugby match. Stress, anxiety and excitement can all make you need to poo more urgently. Girls who have started their periods can find they suffer with stomach cramps and loose poo at certain times of the month. And people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) can find that affects their bowel habits too.

What might this mean?

Most changes in bowel habits are normal and temporary. However, if you're experiencing ongoing differences, or other symptoms like pain, unusual gas or bloating, it might be time to seek help. Changes like this can be a symptom of health conditions such as coeliac disease, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or Crohn's disease, which can start when you're a child or teenager. Or they could be an indication of underlying stress, anxiety or other wellbeing concerns. If in doubt, speak to your parent or guardian and ask them to make an appointment with your GP, who will be able to help you manage symptoms.

Dr Suzie adds: 'There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Remember that us doctors talk about poo all the time!' If you do find it difficult to discuss, you could try using the Bristol Stool Chart to show a doctor what you're experiencing.

Remember the bottom line – your poo can show you a lot about your health.



FUN POO FACTS FROM HISTORY

- Henry VIII had a 'Groom of the Stool'. The king had a member of staff whose role was to monitor and assist his bowel movements. The health of the royal poo was a serious concern and the Groom of the Stool was highly paid and well-respected.
- The biggest fossilised human poo belonged to a Viking. Discovered in York and now on display in the Jorvik Viking Centre, this poo is 8 inches long, 2 inches wide, and enabled palaeoscatologists to see that the Viking had a diet of meat and grains.
- The Romans shared a bum-wiping sponge. In ancient Rome, the latrines were communal and they passed around a natural sea sponge on a stick, called a tersorium, to wipe their bottoms.
- Queen Elizabeth I wouldn't flush. The first flushing toilet was invented by Sir John Harrington and installed in one of Queen Elizabeth I's palaces, but she wouldn't use it as she didn't like the loud noise it made.
- The Efurt Latrine Disaster killed 60 in a cesspit. In 1184, a meeting of European noblemen in Germany ended in disaster when a floor collapsed, plunging the gathering into the cesspit below, where around 60 of them drowned in excrement.

i For more poo facts, read *Poo Through the Ages* by Dr Suzie Edge or follow her on social media on TikTok @suzieedge or Instagram @suz.edge. Her latest book, *Wee, Snot and Slime through Time*, will be published in April 2025 and is available for pre-order now.