

Stools - Unusual Color

Definition

- The stool color is strange or different
- Normal stool colors are any shade of brown, tan, yellow or green
- Colors that may be caused by a disease are red, black and white
- Dark green may look like black, but dark green is a normal color

Health Information

Causes

- Almost always due to food coloring or food additives.
- Stool color relates more to what is eaten than to any disease.
- In children with diarrhea, the gastrointestinal (GI) passage time is very rapid. Stools often come out the same color as the fluid that went in. Examples are Kool-Aid or Jell-O.
- The only colors we worry about are red, black (not dark green) and white.

Clues to Unusual Stool Colors

Red:

- "Bloody stools": 90% of red stools are NOT caused by blood
- Blood from lower GI tract bleeding is red
- *Medicines.* Red medicines (like Amoxicillin). Sometimes, other medicines that turn red in the GI tract (such as Omnicef)
- *Foods.* See list below.

Foods That Can Cause Red Stools:

- Red Jell-O, red or grape Kool-Aid
- Red candy, red licorice
- Red cereals
- Red frosting or food coloring
- Beets
- Cranberries or rhubarb
- Fire Cheetos
- Red peppers
- Tomato juice or soup, tomato skin

Black:

- Blood from stomach bleeding (stomach acid turns blood to a dark, tar-like color)
- *Foods.* Licorice, Oreo cookies, grape juice, blueberries
- *Medicines.* Iron, bismuth (Pepto-Bismol)
- *Other.* Cigarette ashes, charcoal
- *Bile.* Dark green stools from bile may look black under poor lighting. Smear a piece of stool on white paper. Look at it under a bright light. This often confirms that the color is really dark green.

Green:

- Green stools are always normal, but they can be mistaken for black stools.
- *Bile.* Most dark green stools are caused by bile.
- Green stools are more common in formula fed than breastfed infants. It can be normal with both.
- Green stools are more common with diarrhea. This is due to a fast transit time through the gut.

However, formed stools can also be green.

- Dark green stools may look black under poor lighting. Eating spinach can cause dark green stools.
- *Medicines*. Iron (such as in formula)
- *Foods*. See list below.

Foods That Can Cause Green Stools:

- Green Jell-O
- Grape-flavored Pedialyte (turns bright green)
- Green fruit snacks
- Spinach or other leafy vegetables

White Or Light Gray:

- *Foods*. Milk-only diet
- *Medicines*. Aluminum hydroxide (antacids), barium sulfate from barium enema
- *Liver disease*. Babies with blocked bile ducts have stools that are light gray or pale yellow.

Care Advice

1. Overview:

- Strange colors of the stool are almost always due to food coloring.
- The only colors that may relate to disease are red, black and white.
- All other colors are not due to a medical problem.
- Normal stools are not always dark brown. Sometimes, they are light brown, tan or yellow.
- Here is some care advice that should help.

2. Green Stools:

- Green color of the stools is always normal. Most often, green stools are caused by bile.
- Green stools are more common in formula fed than breastfed infants. But, they can be normal with both.
- Green stools are more common with diarrhea. This is due to a fast transit time through the gut. However, formed stools may also be green. This is normal and nothing to worry about.
- If your child takes iron, be sure your child is not taking too much.

3. Avoid the Suspect:

- Don't eat the suspected food.
- Don't drink the suspected drink.
- The strange stool color should go away within 48 hours.

4. Stool Sample:

- If the strange stool color doesn't go away, bring in a sample.
- Keep it in the refrigerator until you leave.

5. What to Expect:

- Remove the cause of the unusual color from the diet.
- Then the stool should change back to normal color.
- This should happen within 48 hours or 2 stools later.

Call Your Doctor If

- Strange color without a cause lasts more than 24 hours
- Suspected food is stopped and strange color lasts more than 48 hours
- You think your child needs to be seen
- Your child becomes worse

Pediatric Care Advice

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