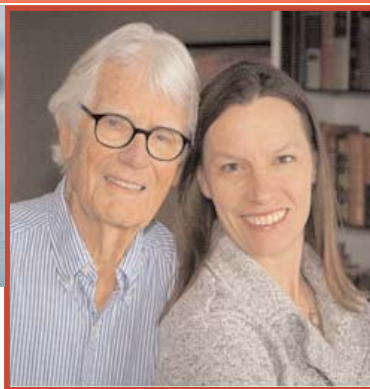


HEALTH CORNER



The Doctor Game Do We All Need Respiratory Masks?

W. Gifford-Jones, M.D. and Diana Gifford-Jones
How healthy is your poop?

Research for this column won't qualify us for the Nobel Prize in Medicine. In fact, readers may say that discussing whether poop sinks or floats is just idle conversation. Years ago, when this column covered this topic, many readers admitted they peeked into the toilet bowl.

One complained this triggered a stiff neck! But what you see in the toilet bowl exposes a lot about your health. It's worth a peek.

It's well known that the North American diet is too low in fiber. In the 1950s, D.P. Burkett, a British surgeon and epidemiologist, reported that Africans, unlike the English, had large bulky stools and didn't suffer from constipation, diverticulitis (small hernias in the large bowel), appendicitis or colon cancer. His conclusion was that Africans consumed large quantities of natural fiber in the form of whole grains, seeds and nuts. Today North Americans consume only 15 grams of fiber daily, when 35 is recommended. Fiber helps the stool hold onto water. Also, the more fiber the greater the number of bacteria in the large bowel which makes the stool as soft as toothpaste. A floating stool is your validation.

Low fiber results in stools as hard as rocks. This slows down their passage through the bowel causing chronic constipation. It's tragic so much money is spent on laxatives which can injure bowels. A dose of 4,000 milligrams (mg) of powdered vitamin C at bedtime is an easy cure. It's safe, inexpensive and the dose can be increased by 2,000 mg every few nights until the problem is resolved.

Stool composition also depends on the amount of fat consumed. A normal stool is about 75 percent water and about one percent fat. If more fat is present, it's called "steatorrhea", perhaps the result of a very fatty meal. These stools are soft, smelly, and stick to the sides of the toilet bowl. If the trouble becomes chronic, it's often due to a lack of enzymes produced by the pancreas.

So, why not examine the stool? After all, doctors advise us to examine our skin for potentially cancerous moles. A quick look for darkening spots or changes in shape and size can prompt early removal and save a life.

Since prevention is always better than cure, a stool peek is a prudent move. You may discover it's become black and tarry, the result of bleeding due to an early malignancy. Keep in mind, changes in colour may be due to eating blackberries or beets. Medication such as Pepto-Bismol, containing bismuth, can be a factor too.

If a stool is the colour of pale clay, the problem may be a stone in the common bile duct that carries bile from the liver to the intestines or a cancer of the pancreas. If the stool is pencil thin, there may be a blockage in the large bowel due to malignancy. Shape, size, and colour of stool can be more important than whether the stool sinks or floats.

To learn if you are a healthy pooper, here are the qualifications. You should have a bowel movement at least once a day, but not more than three times. Your poops should be smooth and about the shape of a banana, not too hard and not too soft. The colour should be an even brown with no visible bits of food, fat, blood, or mucus. The smell should be neutral, not overly unpleasant. The more you answer "yes", the better your poop health is.

These things are not best for a dinner party discussion. But a self-check is a good idea. Being a health-conscious pooper can help you observe changes that merit the attention of your doctor.

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Direct Answers

from Wayne & Tamara

Common Decency

My boyfriend and I have been dating five months. Going into the relationship I knew he had never kissed a girl or been in a relationship. I thought I was safe from the "first girlfriend mistakes" most guys make because my boyfriend is a sensitive 24-year-old. He's watched his friends, and his best friend is now engaged, so I know he knows at least the basics of a relationship by watching his buds. Little did I know, he is clueless! I have to tell him what to do to be romantic. He'll ask, but it never feels romantic if I have to tell him. I know he is heterosexual because he has a heterosexual porn stash. The first time we got naked he freaked! Normally, the girl freaks out right? Anyway, I have to touch him before he will ever think of touching me. I tried using my hands as a guide, but he freaked out and got dressed! I hate it! How can I get him to do things I want without having to tell him or have him freaking out? I have my needs, and I want him to meet them.
Brianna

Brianna, one of the earliest games toddlers learn in life is how to sort shapes. A toddler learns she can't take the star shape and pound it into the round hole with the toy hammer.

You think sex is the missing element in your relationship. There's a much more important element missing, and it is not sex. That element is empathy. We can look at empathy in three ways. First, it means we feel the same emotion as someone else. We literally feel their pain. Second, it means we feel distressed by someone's pain. It makes us uncomfortable. Finally, empathy means we feel compassion. We are so concerned about someone's pain we want to take action. You know there is something substantially different about your boyfriend. This is not how an inexperienced 24-year-old guy would respond, even with an insistent partner. If you told us someone did this to you, we would tell you to say Stop!, because sex between two people should never be forced. You don't say you've been talking to your boyfriend about why he is as he is. Perhaps he doesn't feel connected to you, or safe with you, or attracted to you. Or it could be he was damaged growing up. In addition, finding magazines does not determine someone's sexual identity or their underlying challenges. Your insistence may make him feel he cannot say no, and that creates one more barrier between you.

We cannot say what happened in his previous 24 years that is the underlying problem, but we wonder if you feel empathy for him. Once you saw his fear and confusion, there was no point in elevating his level of distress.

Our home is not our castle. Our body is our castle. So is our mind. They belong to us. This man needs someone willing to engage with him. He is not a mountain to climb or a person to get a leg over. He is a human being.

We are not saying you have to be his social worker or his sex therapist. We are saying, if you can't help him or point him in the direction of help, then accept it as a matter of sorting shapes and holes. The star shape cannot be pounded into the round hole.

The world gets more instant every day, with door delivery and internet access. But people are not instant. People are not food delivery or an Amazon package or a streaming device. They are people. We don't get to treat people like a phone app.

Just because today is the grand opening of a new Disney theme park, it doesn't mean we have to go on the rides today. It doesn't mean his problems can or must be solved today.

While you are not obligated to open a window for him, you can. But merely wanting him to meet your needs shows neither love nor empathy.

Wayne & Tamara



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