SYMPTOM

Stool color changes

Stool color changes are bowel movements that look different from their usual shade of brown.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Usually painless, noticed as an unusual bowel movement

WHERE IT IS FELT
Bowel movements from the intestines

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Food pigments, medicines or supplements, diarrhea

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Black tarry stool, visible blood, or pale stool with jaundice

USUALLY LASTS
Based on food, medicines, bowel speed, or illness

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Unexplained changes persist several days or keep returning

Overview

Normal stool ranges from light to dark brown. Its color comes mainly from bile, a yellow-green digestive fluid made by the liver. Bile pigments change as food moves through your intestines.

A different color does not always mean something is wrong. Foods, food dyes, medicines, supplements, and faster digestion can temporarily change stool color. However, black, red, or very pale stool may sometimes signal bleeding or a problem with bile flow.

Color alone cannot identify the cause. The stool's texture, your recent meals and medicines, and other symptoms are also important.

What it may feel or look like

Most color changes do not cause a separate physical feeling. You may simply notice an unusual bowel movement.

Common appearances include:

Blood can look bright red, dark red, maroon, or black. Black stool caused by bleeding is often

sticky, tar-like, and unusually strong-smelling. Appearance is not always reliable, so unexplained black or bloody stool needs medical advice.

- Green: Dark or bright green, sometimes with loose stool
- Red: Red streaks, spots, or stool that looks red throughout
- Black: Dark stool that may be formed, or sticky and tar-like
- Pale: Light gray, clay-colored, white, or putty-like
- Yellow: Yellow-brown or bright yellow, sometimes greasy or difficult to flush
- Orange: Orange-brown stool, often after strongly colored foods

Common causes

Food is a frequent cause of short-lived color changes. Beets, tomatoes, red food dyes, and some berries can make stool look red. Leafy greens and green or blue dyes can produce green stool. Carrots, squash, and other orange foods may create an orange shade.

Green stool can also happen when stool moves quickly through the intestines, such as during diarrhea. The bile pigments do not have enough time to change fully from green to brown.

Medicines and supplements may affect color. Iron commonly makes stool dark green or black. Medicines containing bismuth, which are used for some stomach symptoms, can also turn the stool black.

Less common causes include problems digesting or absorbing food. Yellow, greasy, foul-smelling stool may occur when the intestines do not absorb fat properly. Possible causes include celiac disease, infection such as giardiasis, or conditions affecting the pancreas. These conditions usually cause other symptoms, such as ongoing diarrhea, bloating, or weight loss.

Red or maroon stool may be blood from the lower digestive tract. Possible causes include hemorrhoids, a small tear near the anus, inflammation, pouches in the colon, or growths. Black tarry stool may result from bleeding higher in the digestive tract, such as the stomach.

Repeated pale or clay-colored stool can mean that too little bile is reaching the intestine. This may happen with conditions involving the liver, gallbladder, bile ducts, or pancreas. It is more concerning when accompanied by yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, itching, or upper abdominal pain.

When to seek medical care

Seek emergency care now if black or bloody stool occurs with fainting, severe dizziness, confusion, marked weakness, trouble breathing, vomiting blood, or severe or worsening abdominal pain. These symptoms can occur with significant bleeding or serious illness.

Contact a healthcare professional the same day if:

Book a routine appointment if an unexplained color change lasts more than a few days or keeps returning. You should also arrange an appointment for ongoing greasy yellow stool, persistent diarrhea, weight loss, reduced appetite, or repeated small amounts of rectal bleeding.

If you take iron or bismuth, dark stool may be expected. Do not assume medicine is the cause if the stool is sticky and tar-like or you also feel unwell.

- Stool is black and tar-like without a clear explanation
- You pass maroon stool or more than a small streak of red blood
- Bleeding continues or happens repeatedly
- Pale stool occurs with yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, fever, or pain
- A baby has white, chalky, or clay-colored stool

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional may ask when the change began and whether you have pain, diarrhea, constipation, fever, weight loss, or bleeding. Be ready to discuss recent foods, supplements, and medicines. A photograph can be helpful if you feel comfortable taking one.

An examination may check your abdomen and the area around the anus. Depending on your symptoms, blood tests may look for anemia, which means too few healthy red blood cells, or signs of liver and pancreas problems.

Stool tests can check for hidden blood, infection, or poor absorption. Some people need imaging or an endoscopy, in which a flexible camera examines part of the digestive tract. Tests are chosen based on the color change and accompanying symptoms; most people do not need every test.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause rather than the color itself. A change caused by food usually needs no treatment and clears after the food passes through your system.

Keep a brief record of stool color, texture, meals, medicines, and other symptoms. If diarrhea is present, drink enough fluids to replace what you lose.

Do not stop prescribed iron or another medicine solely because it changes stool color. Ask the prescriber or pharmacist whether the change is expected. Seek care if there is any possibility that dark stool represents bleeding.

Bleeding, infection, poor absorption, or blocked bile flow requires treatment directed at the underlying problem. Avoid trying to treat unexplained black, bloody, or persistently pale stool with home remedies.

What to expect

Food-related changes often affect only one or two bowel movements. Medicine-related changes may continue while you take the product. Green stool from diarrhea usually returns to brown as digestion slows.

Changes caused by bleeding, poor absorption, or reduced bile flow may continue until the cause is treated. Follow-up may be needed if symptoms persist, return, or change.

Common questions

Can food make stool look like blood?

Yes. Beets, red food coloring, tomatoes, and some berries can create a red appearance. Because food and blood can look similar, seek advice if you are unsure, especially if the change repeats or you feel unwell.

Is green stool normal?

Green stool is often harmless, particularly after eating green foods or during a brief episode of diarrhea. Arrange an appointment if it continues with pain, fever, dehydration, weight loss, or ongoing diarrhea.

How can I tell whether black stool is from iron or bleeding?

Iron often makes formed stool dark green or black. Bleeding may produce sticky, tar-like stool with a strong smell, but appearance cannot confirm the cause. Get prompt advice for unexplained black stool or symptoms such as dizziness or weakness.

Is one pale bowel movement concerning?

A single lighter stool can occur. Repeated white, gray, or clay-colored stool should be assessed, particularly if you also have dark urine, yellow skin or eyes, itching, or abdominal pain.

Sources

- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: Symptoms and Causes of Gastrointestinal Bleeding
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: Diagnosis of Gastrointestinal Bleeding
- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Black or Tarry Stools
- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Stools-Pale or Clay-Colored
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Signs and Symptoms of Giardia Infection