Dear Alice,

What does the stool that floats say about a person's health? Does it matter if your stool floats or not? What is healthier?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The color, consistency, and smell of stools say a lot about our health, and, of course, our diet. According to the National Institutes of Health, healthy stools typically sink. However, floating stools do not necessarily mean that there is a problem. Usually, floating stools result from nutrient malabsorption that can lead to excess flatus (a.k.a. gas), which makes the stool less dense and thus allows it to float.

Nutrient malabsorption occurs when the body does not completely digest and absorb nutrients from the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. According to MedicineNet.com, normal intestinal bacteria digest foods (typically sugars and polysaccharides) that have not already been digested in the small intestine. These bacteria, in turn, produce excess gas (in the form of hydrogen and/or methane). When more food is digested by bacteria in the lower intestine, more gas is produced that needs to find a way out either via farting or via floating stools.

Having diarrhea and floating stools for more than two weeks may be a sign of nutrient malabsorption. Alternative explanations for floating stools include a change in diet, diarrhea, acute GI infections, and diseases such as celiac disease.

It may be helpful to keep track of any changes to your diet and see whether removing certain foods causes symptoms to disappear. However, see a health care provider if you notice a change in stool characteristics lasting over two weeks, or if these symptoms are accompanied by blood, weight loss, fever, or dizziness. Make an appointment with a health care provider, who may possibly refer you to a gastroenterologist. To learn more about digestion, check out the slide show on the Mayo Clinic's website.

Here's hoping this answer floats your, er? boat.

Alice!

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