Dear Alice,

What is mucous (besides another word I probably can’t spell) and what is its function? Is it good or bad, maybe either depending, what produces it, should we be glad to be expelling it, and how do we dry it up? And if it is from a bacterial infection, can that be handled with natural antibiotics? How can breathing at night be eased, dripping all over your books be avoided, and hocking up gobs of goo done tastefully?

Thanks, Stuffy

Mucus is a thick and slimy secretion from mucous membranes and glands. It contains mucin (a slippery lubricant), white blood cells, inorganic salts, water, and cells that have peeled away from tissue. It lubricates and protects areas of the body where mucous membranes are present -- the digestive tract included. Mucus also makes swallowing easier, prevents stomach acid from harming your stomach wall, and catches smoke, particles, and other pollutants in your airways so they won’t enter the lungs. Mucus also facilitates sexual intercourse. Is this goo good or bad? It’s definitely good because it does all of the above, but “bad” when it drips on your books, keeps you up at night, and gathers in gobs at the back of your throat.

Bacterial infections often produce lots of green or yellow phlegm (mucous material), while allergic reactions frequently lead to lots of colorless mucus. If your symptoms show up suddenly, hang around for a long time, or come and go on a regular basis, a visit to your health care provider is important for identification of their cause, followed by treatment with medication and/or suggestions on how to reduce environmental and lifestyle factors that may be manufacturing much of your mucus. Allergies could be the culprit -- even to your pillow stuffing, which is why some stuffed-up sleepers experience more mucus-related symptoms at night. The on-your-back sleeping position also allows fluid to drip and pool at the back of your throat. Sinus infections, stuffy rooms, and poor breathing can promote a phlegm-o-rama as well. It’s better to try and find the root cause of your stuffiness before experimenting with remedies that might only end up being temporary solutions.

To hock or not to hock -- is that the question? Expelling your sputum in a healthy and tasteful way isn’t so difficult. Facial tissues and handkerchiefs were designed to receive and conceal
snot -- sidewalks, walls, and water fountains were not. Preventive nose wiping and blowing should cut down on the quantity of goo that collects in your nose and throat, and thus the dripping and desire to launch it.

Alice!
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