Stools cause a stink in the bathroom

Alice,

I am living in a residence hall, and I never realized this until now, but my bowel movements are really smelly. It has gotten to a point where if I don't find a place to do it secretly, it becomes a great source of embarrassment. Could I be eating something that causes my bowel movements to be really smelly?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You and your feces are not alone: all excrement has some odor, although the degree to which these scents are found offensive varies from nose to nose. This is good to keep in mind since you mention that you've only noticed the bad smell of your bowel movements now that you're living in a residence hall (with what appears to be a communal bathroom). Before going into potential causes of abnormally foul-smelling feces, you need to think about whether yours is really all that abnormal, or instead, if you're just one of many on your floor who may share this common concern. When you use the bathroom, is the smell unpleasant enough that you have to open a window, if there is one, or spray air freshener each and every time? Do other people complain about the smell?

One common cause of malodorous bathroom visits is stool with lots of fat in it, which is the result of a high fat diet. While it might seem unseemly to mention things such as this, it's also a good idea to take a look if something doesn't seem right. Fatty feces, in addition to looking different, will often float around (if you're using a toilet with a water-filled bowl). Other aspects of your diet can also affect the smell of your bowel movements. Have there been any major changes in your eating plan since you began living in the residence hall, or do you notice changes in the smell depending on what you eat? You might want to track the effects your diet has on your stool's smell to figure out if what you're eating is really playing any role.

Some symptoms in addition to a noxious odor may indicate a physical problem that needs medical attention, including:

- Abnormally colored stools (especially pale ones)
- Mucus in the stool
- Bloody stools
Symptoms such as abdominal pain, fever, cramping, and/or weight loss

If you are experiencing any of the above, you need to visit your health care provider and possibly get a referral to a gastroenterologist. If these factors don't seem to relate to your case, it sounds as though you've just noticed the odor of your stool because of the new living situation. This is rather normal—living in a residence hall is a new social experience and with that come many thoughts about how one compares to the others with which one lives.

If you've ruled out that the stink of your bowel movements is the result of a physical problem, and you're still bothered by it, you might want to open that window before you use the facility, or keep that can of air freshener nearby when you've got to do number two. A spritz of air freshener sprayed directly into the bowl ought to do, or you could try perfume or another type of scent. Some people recommend lighting a match to cover up the stench (the burning sulphur does the trick), but this might not be advisable depending on your residence hall rules and the sensitivity of fire detectors. You may also want to try more imaginative things, such as placing potpourri sachets in the bathroom stalls.

Smell you later (just kidding),

Alice!

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