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by **SQUATCHY** | 2 comments

# Poop 101: A Guide to Gut Health, Common Problems, and Simple Solutions

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*Guest post by: Ben Greenfield*

Although it's not the sexiest thing in the world, we're going to talk about poop. If you don't already look in the toilet after going number two, it's time to start. The state of your poop can tell you a plethora of things about your health, with no extra money or effort required. Just get over the whole looking at your own poop thing.

In this article, I'm going to tell you about the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy poop, what it can tell you about your health, some of the common causes of unhealthy poop, and a few tips

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you can use to increase the health of your stool and your digestive system.

Scientists are continuing to learn that the gastrointestinal tract (and the bacterial colonies within) has a direct role in conditions ranging from emotional disorders like depression and schizophrenia, brain function, food sensitivities and allergies, inflammation, digestive function, and more. The thing is, sometimes there are no clear signs that something is amiss with your digestive system. Symptoms can be muted and mild, or you may have no noticeable symptoms whatsoever. Just as a canary in a coalmine can be a reliable litmus test for safety, a turd in a toilet bowl can give you some useful clues about the health of your digestive system.

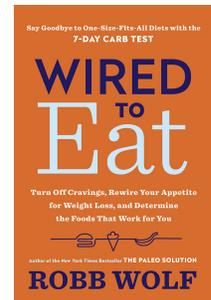
Without further adieu, let's talk about poo.

## Poop Quality 101

When looking at your stool, it helps to know what you should be looking for. In case you didn't know, a few researchers from Bristol University developed a stool chart that was published in the Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology in 1997. It was originally developed as a way to measure colon transit time, but later earned its place as a reliable tool in evaluating different treatment strategies for various bowel diseases. The so-called Bristol stool chart has also been a valuable tool in public health as it classifies poop into seven different types:

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# Bristol Stool Chart

Type 1		Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass)
Type 2		Sausage-shaped but lumpy
Type 3		Like a sausage but with cracks on its surface
Type 4		Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
Type 5		Soft blobs with clear-cut edges (passed easily)
Type 6		Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool
Type 7		Watery, no solid pieces. <b>Entirely Liquid</b>

-Type 4 is what you want to shoot for.

-Types 3 and 5 are reasonable.

-Types 1, 2, 6, and 7 are all clear signs that strange things are afoot at the Circle K.

The Bristol chart is a good place to start, and if your stool resembles one of the less healthy types, there are a few other signs to look for to help you better identify a problem.

## Color

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Healthy stool should be brown in color, which comes from bile in the small intestine. However, it's normal for it to have a tinge of green if you've consumed a massive kale smoothie, or red if you've eaten a lot of beets. If your stool is bloody, or is consistently a different color with no logical connection to the foods you're eating, there might be something going on.

## Smell

Your poop will never smell like the potpourri you keep by the toilet, that's just the way it is. Poop smells for a number of reasons. The bacteria and fermentation that occur in the gut are one smell-producing reason, and depending on what you eat, that might affect the smell. If you eat a lot of fermentable starches, fructose, and animal protein, it's probably going to be pretty potent and sulphuric. Another common cause of abnormally putrid stool is malabsorption. Celiac disease, pancreas issues, various inflammatory bowel disorders like Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, food allergies and sensitivities are all possible causes of malabsorption, which we'll get into later.

## Feel

Your bathroom experience should be pretty quick if your stool is healthy. You shouldn't be sitting on the porcelain throne drafting emails or finishing crossword puzzles. The process should be relatively quick and painless, and if you feel a significant amount of discomfort and strain, that may not be healthy.

## Does it sink or float?

Healthy poop can sink or float, and either one can give you an idea of its composition. A stool that floats has more fat, which can be a sign of malabsorption, whereas a sinking stool signifies a high fiber-ratio, which is a good thing.

# What Your Poop Can Tell You

The biggest clues your poop can tell you about your health involve the efficiency of your digestive system and the health of



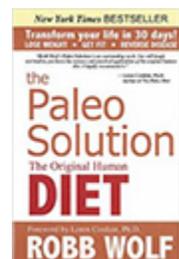
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your gut. If you're having unhealthy bowel movements it can be a clear sign of gut dysfunction, it could mean an imbalance of the bacteria in your gut, it might be an issue of food sensitivity or intolerance, or it might even be stress.

## Culprit #1: Gut Dysfunction

Gut dysfunction is a pretty complex issue, and certainly tied to adverse stool, so I'll try to break it down into a few separate, but intricately-linked points.

## Increased Gut Permeability

The common element of many GI-related issues is increased gut permeability. The lining of your gut is the first line of defense for your entire immune system, and when this line is breached, your system is vulnerable to undigested food particles and proteins which can result in an immune response, food allergies, or inflammation. Chronically increased gut permeability can lead to a condition called "Leaky gut syndrome", which is very uncomfortable and would have noticeable symptoms extending beyond abnormal poop. Leaky gut is like installing a water filter that has huge holes in it: anything you don't want to be drinking ends up inside you because it can pass freely through the giant holes. You can learn more about Leaky Gut by reading [this article](#) published on RobbWolf.com.

Permeability is one half of the equation, and actual damage to the lining of your intestine is the other half. It's sort of a chicken and the egg situation. Your small intestine is lined with microscopic, finger-like structures called villi. Your villi increase the surface area for absorption by up to 1,000 times and their presence ensures you actually absorb the majority of the nutrients you ingest. Some compounds in food can irritate the lining of the small intestine and destroy these villi, significantly reducing how well you absorb nutrients. Substances like gluten, lactose, lectins (found in many beans, grains, and some nuts, seeds, and fruits and vegetables) and saponins are common culprits that can cause inflammation or directly damage the gut lining. Typically, substances that irritate the gut lining manifest in bloating, feelings of tiredness, a

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hyperactive bowel, and often very sizeable or uncomfortable visits to the bathroom.

## Inflammation

Fatty stool can be a sign of inflammation, which can result from something like gluten or lactose intolerance, as two common examples. Gliadin is a protein molecule found in most, but not all gluten-containing foods — primarily in things like wheat, rye, barley, spelt, teff, and couscous. Gliadin can cause an inflammatory reaction in the small intestines, and oftentimes, people who don't have Celiac disease or gluten-intolerance may still have a sensitivity with no obvious symptoms. As a result of damage to the GI tract or inflammation, digestive enzyme production can be impaired, which can lead to fat malabsorption. A dead giveaway of this is if you see fatty “oil slicks” in the toilet bowl. Not pretty.

## Food Allergies and Sensitivities

If you find that you're running to the bathroom with an unusual frequency, and have a significant amount of GI distress to match, you may have a food sensitivity. It's possible that there is a compound or multiple compounds in that meal or in your diet that is causing the response. Food allergies, on the other hand, are a much bigger deal and are often accompanied by serious symptoms like throat swelling or respiratory distress, and the symptoms can range from mild to severe. Increased gut permeability is a major cause of adult-onset food allergies. As your gut lining becomes more permeable, undigested food particles and pathogens can be absorbed into the bloodstream, which can elicit a heightened immune response and in some cases, food allergies can develop.

## Insufficient Digestive Enzymes or Improper Food Preparation

On a recent Q & A podcast episode called [What Your Poop Can Tell You About Your Health, How To Heal Tendons & Ligaments Faster, Natural Ways To Decrease Cortisol & More!](#)

I had a listener call in and ask what it meant if food was passing through her digestive tract and coming out the other end still intact. To state the obvious, this is a clear sign that the foods aren't being properly digested. If you're seeing undigested food in your stool, it is likely because of digestive enzyme insufficiency. This can happen when the amount of food exceeds the capacity of your digestive enzymes, a genetic inability to produce certain enzymes (lactase is a common one for people who are lactose-intolerant), or it could be something more problematic like gliadin exposure which can impair digestive enzyme production from damage to the GI tract (as mentioned in the previous point). If you struggle with tummy issues after eating too much, here are [5 Powerful Calorie Control Tricks To Help You Eat Less Food](#).

Another reason you may be seeing undigested food in your stool is inadequate food preparation. This could mean something as obvious as not chewing well enough (ideally, each bite should be chewed 20-25 times), but more commonly, lots of people have difficulty digesting foods like beans, nuts, seeds, and grains that aren't prepared properly. These foods have an outer coating that acts as a natural defense mechanism to protect the plants from microbes and predators, allowing them to withstand passage through the digestive tract of animals to be successfully pooped out and planted in the soil. In most cases, these foods can be rendered more digestible through [soaking and sprouting](#).

To learn all about fixing your gut, check out this in-depth article I wrote on the topic called [How To Fix Your Gut: 9 Bad Things That Happen When Your Digestion Goes Wrong, How To Hit The Reboot Button & The Best Way To Detox Your Body](#).

## **Culprit #2: Imbalanced Gut Bacteria**

Just as damage to the intestinal lining can significantly impair digestion, the composition of your gut microbiome can also determine how well you digest and absorb what you eat. Your digestive tract contains 500 species and 3 pounds of bacteria that collectively form a giant ecosystem that helps you digest food, regulate hormones, excrete toxins, and produce vitamins and other healing compounds that keep your gut and your body healthy. If that ecosystem is out of balance, then a bacterial

imbalance called gut “dysbiosis” is the result. I get my gut tested once per year and break it all down in this [Step-By-Step Guide To Testing Your Gut For Nasty Invaders](#).

Things to look for in your stool that may signify insufficient gut bacteria are undigested fiber, constipation, or diarrhea. On the other hand, too much gut bacteria can make foods unavailable for absorption. If you’re feeling gassy, crampy, and bloated it’s possible that there is a bacterial overgrowth throwing off the balance of your microbiome. Signs to look for could be diarrhea, constipation, or fatty stools. Learn more about gut bacteria by listening to The Paleo Solution Podcast episode with Dr. Ruscio called [The Real Deal With Gut Microbiota](#).

## Culprit #3: Stress

Unhealthy and irregular stool can actually be a sign that you are over-stressed. Your GI tract is directly linked to your brain — the so called “gut-brain axis” — and when you’re overly stressed, your central nervous system “talks” to your digestive system and slows it down. During stress, blood flow and enzyme production are limited, which can cause your GI system to slow down while your body can focus on the stress response. So if you’re constipated, or conversely, find yourself making frequent and unpleasant trips to the bathroom throughout the day, that may be a sign that you need to focus on reducing the stress in your life. A little stress isn’t a bad thing, but if you’re chronically stressed and it’s affecting your bowels, you may want to unwind a little. Other signs related to stress and unhealthy stool are brain fog, headache, fatigue, poor sleep, or depression. Lastly, if you’re experiencing watery or loose stool, that could be a sign of too much physical stress from overtraining. Need some tips on reducing stress? Check out my article [The 7 Best Stress-Fighting Weapons That Will Make Your Mind-Body Connection 100% Bulletproof](#).

## Common Causes of Unhealthy Poop (Recap)

- Gut dysfunction
- Stress

- Food sensitivities or allergies
- Imbalanced gut bacteria
- Improper food prep

# Tips For Healthier Poop

## Balance Your Bacteria

You can bolster your microbiome by eating a moderate amount of fiber, a wide variety of vegetables, probiotic foods (kefir, kombucha, fermented vegetables like kimchi and sauerkraut, or high-quality dairy products) and consider taking a multi-strain [probiotic supplement](#). You can experiment with eating foods that are rich in prebiotic starch like beans and legumes, fruits, or starchy vegetables. Bear in mind these fermentable carbohydrates can irritate the gut in some people (we'll touch on this next).

## Fix Your Diet

If you're having bowel issues, one of the best things you can do is experiment with your food choices. There are common problem foods like dairy, sugar, gluten, grains, and nuts that you can try removing from your diet to see how you feel. It's certainly not the case for everyone, but intolerance to these foods is common, and even if there are no obvious symptoms, your poop might be a clue that something in your diet isn't agreeing with your gut.

Studies have found that people with self-reported "gluten sensitivity" actually had zero bad gut effects from eating gluten and experienced complete elimination of their gut issues after they underwent a dietary reduction of fermentable, poorly-absorbed, short-chain carbohydrates ([FODMAPs](#)). These could be things like sugar alcohols, lectins, and fructose that you'd find in fruits, processed foods, and seeds and grains. In the same vein, you can experiment with an [elimination diet](#) or [autoimmune diet](#) to identify sensitivities and gradually incorporate foods back into your diet once you've found your trigger foods.

When all else fails, or you're over playing smelly rounds of Twenty Questions with your toilet bowl ("does it rhyme with falutin?") trying to identify problem foods, it's best to get tested. If you want to rule out food allergies and sensitivities, you can get a simple allergy test from your doctor, or if you want the gold standard in food allergy testing, this is the [best option](#). If you want to learn more about the health of your gut flora, there are testing kits for that too. Since your gut microbiome is a dynamic ecosystem, and changes throughout the day, I like to use a [3-day gut panel](#). This allows you to take multiple stool samples and gives you a more complete reading of digestive enzyme production and the health of your gut bacteria. If your gut bacteria is significantly imbalanced or you aren't adequately producing digestive enzymes, your digestion will be impaired, and it's more than likely your poop will reflect this.

## Take Digestive Enzymes

If you've ever been to Italy, or maybe the Olive Garden, I don't know, you may have experienced the post-dinner elixir known as the digestif. It's an herbal-infused alcohol derivative that can aid in digestion. Ingredients like fennel, caraway, and savory aid in digestion, and alcohol also has a stimulatory effect on production of the enzyme pepsin, and on pancreas and gallbladder secretions. Additionally things like lemon juice, ox bile extract, HCL, various herbs, and [digestive enzyme supplements](#) can aid in digestion as well.

If you want to learn more about the various digestive enzymes you can take, and how to take them, check out this podcast I recorded on the subject entitled [Probiotic Enemas, Digestive Enzyme Myths, Breathing 10 Kilograms of Oxygen, Low-Protein Diets & More!](#)

## Chew your food

This seems obvious, but chewing efficiently can help you better digest your food. Mechanical digestion in the mouth is where digestion actually begins, and if you eat too quickly, you'll just be passing the buck onto the stomach and intestinal tract to pick up the extra work, so try to be more mindful about your mastication habits (that's chewing). A useful trick I've found is that, much like

starting off the day with deep-breathing exercises or gratitude journaling, focusing on chewing each bite of food at breakfast makes me more mindful of my chewing throughout the entire day. Chewing more not only makes foods more **bioaccessible and readily absorbed** by the body, longer chewing times has also been shown to result in **fewer calories being consumed and increased levels of appetite-regulating hormones**.

## Hydrate

If your issue is constipation or rock hard stools, there's a good chance you're dehydrated. Water aids in the digestion process by easing the passage of food and helping your gut bacteria do their thing.

## Manage Stress

While it's not particularly compelling, it must be said: make sure you're not over-stressed. Stress can impair the digestion process big-time, so find some time in your day to unwind, and see if that makes your bathroom experience a little more enjoyable.

## Conclusion

If you're having problematic poop, the biggest clue it can give you is that your digestive system needs attention. Since the gut is such a complex system, learning what your poop says about its health is almost like a game of charades or twenty questions. It can give you the clues to help you narrow down your search, but you may need to do some more digging. Your poop can be an early red flag that something is wrong, and experimenting with your diet and getting tested are two ways to ensure you get to the root of the problem.

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## SQUATCHY

Christopher Williams (a.k.a. Squatchy) is a paleo aficionado, educator, personal trainer, wellness coach, and hobbyist chef. He also works as part of the Robb Wolf team.

**CATEGORIES:** [Digestion \(UC, IBS, GERD, Celiac\)](#), [General](#)

## COMMENTS



**JOHN ES**

[REPLY](#)

MAY 8, 2017 AT 7:19 PM

Just a tiny amount of trapped gas will make a stool float, so, I would not assume undigested fat as the cause.



**JACOB**

[REPLY](#)

MAY 9, 2017 AT 1:54 AM

Very interesting reading. Just went around my family and friends and asked which category they were. Quite mixed results from 1 to basically 7. Interestingly enough, the only person with a 4 was the one who was the most paranoid about his toilet visits because he got obsessed if he didn't go every morning like clockwork. Anyway, a quick

question – I know that NSAIDs aren't good for our guts ( or anything else probably ) but how about Paracetamol? is it as damaging to the gut as NSAIDs or is it safer ( or should I say, "less bad" ) ?

Regards,

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**ROBB WOLF**, 2x *New York Times* bestselling author of [The Paleo Solution](#) and [Wired to Eat](#), is a former research biochemist and one of the world's leading experts in

Paleolithic nutrition. Wolf has transformed the lives of tens of thousands of people around the world via his top ranked iTunes podcast and wildly popular seminar series.

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