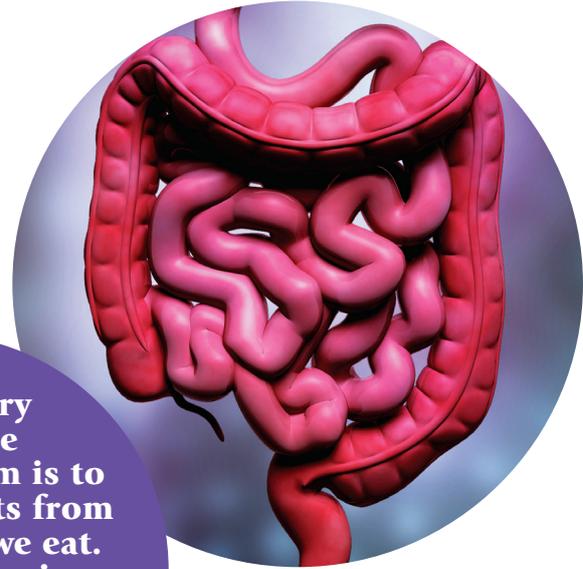




Datin Dr Liew Yin Mei

# Going with Your Gut



## Bowel movements tell a story. What's yours?

The primary role of the digestive system is to extract nutrients from the food that we eat. The process begins in your mouth, goes through your stomach, and ends with your trip to the bathroom.

### Digestive disorders

Statistics by the Ministry of Health (MOH) showed that in 2012, digestive diseases ranked as the fifth highest cause of deaths, and the seventh principal cause of admissions in MOH hospitals. Cancers of the digestive system are common in Malaysia.

due to foods such as iron supplements and black liquorice), or **bright-red** (bleeding in the lower intestinal region).

Constipation and diarrhoea are usually not serious, and can be addressed with over-the-counter medication, or changes in your lifestyle and diet.

### Look before you flush...

Physical signs and symptoms can indicate potential problems with your health, and monitoring your output can help you identify them. Healthy stools should be about two to five centimetres (cm) in diameter, and up to 45cm long. Sausage-shaped stools are an indicator of good digestive health. They should not be loose, watery or bloody. Narrow, pencil-like or ribbon-like stools can indicate a bowel obstruction, tumour, or worse, colon cancer.

**White, pale** or **grey** stools may indicate a lack of bile, suggesting a serious problem such as hepatitis cirrhosis, pancreatic disorders, or a blocked bile duct.

What you eat also affects the colour and consistency of your stools. For instance, eating beetroot may give you red stools.

### Prevention is better than cure

Keep your bowel movements regular by adopting healthy eating habits and an active lifestyle. Maintaining a daily dietary fibre intake of at least 20 – 30g will help ease the digestive process. Fibre is present in foods such as whole-grain cereals and breads, fresh vegetables, fruits and legumes.

Increasing your level of physical activity helps your digestive system function optimally. Maintain a physically active lifestyle with at least 30 minutes of physical activity, five days a week. Exercising can help ease constipation by decreasing the time that food takes to move through the large intestines.

### Stool colour: When to worry

The colour and condition of your stools are influenced by your diet and its bile (a yellow-green fluid that digests fats) content. Healthy stools are usually medium to light brown in colour, and are formed into a long, uniform shape with a smooth and soft surface.

### Constipation and diarrhoea

Constipation and diarrhoea are common digestive problems that disrupt regular bowel movement, and change the appearance of your stools. Those who are constipated experience infrequent bowel movements, resulting in stools that are hard and dry.

However, frequency of bowel movements varies, and can range from once or twice a day to as infrequently as once or twice a week. As long as it does not discomfort you, there is no need to worry.

Last but not least, make sure your body is well-hydrated by drinking at least eight glasses of water a day. Adjust your liquid intake according to your activity level and the weather, such as drinking more if you are exercising and perspiring heavily, or if the weather is very hot and dry.

Colours that may indicate digestive problems include: **green** (the digestion process is happening too quickly, sometimes causing diarrhoea), **yellow** (it contains excess fat and is a possible sign of absorption problems), **black** (could be bleeding in the upper digestive tract or

Meanwhile, those who experience diarrhoea will pass loose and watery stools more frequently than usual. Their stools will look like soft blobs with clear-cut edges, fluffy pieces with ragged edges, or are entirely liquid with no solid pieces.

*Datin Dr Liew Yin Mei is a Consultant Physician and member of Digestive Health Advisory Board. The author is not associated with and does not endorse any brands or products. For free digestive health info guides or more information, please contact 03-5632 3301.*