Mucus in stool harmful? [1]

Dear Alice,

While reading a pamphlet that came with anti-diarrheals, I noticed it said to contact a doctor if there is either blood or mucus in the stool. The blood I understand, but mucus? What would that look like, where does it come from, why wouldn't it digest, what would it mean, and why would there be cause for concern?

Thanks,
Possibly Concerned

Answer

Dear Possibly Concerned,

Mucus comes to mind when thinking about having a cold or allergies. But mucus in stool? Yes, it's possible, and even normal! Though typically unnoticed, mucus is naturally produced in the intestines to keep the colon lining moist and lubricated. Additionally, it is normal for increased amounts of mucus to accompany short-term diarrhea or constipation. If mucus in the stool accompanies other changes (blood, rectal bleeding) and bowel habits for more than a few weeks, you may want to consider seeing a health care provider.

Stools that contain mucus accompanied by blood or a black tarry substance may be a sign of inflammatory bowel diseases, such as Crohn's disease [2] or ulcerative colitis. Mucus in stools may also be a sign of an infected ulcer or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Check out Spastic colon [3] in the Go Ask Alice! general health archives for more information on IBS.

If you notice any changes in your stools or related bathroom habits, it may be helpful to keep a journal where you record these changes, along with any changes in diet. You may want to ask yourself when you first noticed these changes and how long they have lasted. It may also be helpful to discuss your concerns with a health care provider. If you are a student at Columbia, you can make an appointment to see a health care provider by either calling x4-2284 or visiting Open Communicator [4].

It may seem strange to see an increased amount of mucus in a place where you wouldn't normally expect it, but eventually, you'll get to the bottom of it.

Alice!
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