



The Dirt on Diarrhea:

What's Normal and When to See Your Vet

As a practicing veterinarian, my goal is to help dog parents determine when they can safely treat “the runs” at home and when medical help is required. But before we dive into the depths of diarrhea, we need to determine what “normal doggie doo” looks like.

What is “normal dog poop?”

If you can't pick it up and hold it in your hand, it's too loose. Roughly speaking, healthy dogs should defecate about the same number of meals they're fed each day. Excessive treating and in-between meal snacks can alter your dog's poop schedule, initiating mushy stools. Most medium-sized dogs' poop should be two to three pieces of about 1-inch wide, 3- to 4-inch long portions. Each segment should be well-formed, firm to the touch and moist.

The color of a dog's feces is typically tied to diet and gut bacteria. Artificial colors, fillers and chemicals in the food can also alter the hue. In general, healthy canine feces should be light brown or tan to dark brown. Black, tarry, red, yellow or green are colors to contact your veterinarian about.

Your dog's feces should smell like, well, feces. It shouldn't overwhelm your nostrils

or alarm bystanders. Some of the healthiest dogs I know — my own — have very little offensive odor (or excess gas, but that's another story). I know you're thinking, “That veterinarian doesn't think his dog's poop stinks!” — but it's mostly true. I can usually detect if a guest slipped my pooches some unhealthy snacks or a cat bowl was tipped over by the foul odor the next morning. If your pet's poop smell changes suddenly, it's worth noting and closely observing for any other changes. Excess fat is often the culprit for seismic shifts in fecal smells.

What about blood in the stool?

Blood in a dog's stool doesn't always look like blood. Fecal blood originating higher in the intestinal tract, especially the small intestine, will be black or brown and often appears as dark flecks, specks or coffee grounds. The blood turns dark due to digestion by enzymes secreted in the small intestine.

If the blood stems from the lower intestinal tract, especially the large intestine, distal colon or rectal region, it will most likely look like normal blood. Red or pink drops or smears are frequently discovered on top of the stool, sidewalks or grass.

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