The Scoop on Poop- another essential of life

As we said to Robin Young on NPR's *Here and Now*, "a lot of life's issues all boil down to the essentials of life…eat, sleep, drink, pee, poop and love." Continuing our ideas and updates on all of those baby essentials, here's the scoop on poop :

Okay, admit it.

Before you became a parent, you never really gave much thought to poop.

Now you are captivated and can even discuss it over meal time: your child's poop with its changing colors and consistency. Your vocabulary for poop has likely also changed as you are now parents. Before your baby's birth, you probably used some grown-up word like "bowel movement" or "stool" or perhaps some "R" rated term not appropriate to this pediatric site. But now, all that has changed.

As pediatricians, we have many conversations with new parents, and some not-so-new parents, about poop. Mostly this topic is of real interest to parents with newborns, but poop issues come out at other milestones in a child's life, namely starting solid foods and potty training. So we present to you the scoop on poop.

Poop comes in three basic colors that are all equal signs of

normal health: **brown, yellow, and green**. Newborn poop, while typically yellow and mustard like, can occasionally come out in the two other colors, even if what goes in, namely breast milk or formula, stays the same. The color change is more a reflection of how long the milk takes to pass through the intestines and how much bile acid gets mixed in with the developing poop.

Bad colors of poop are: red (blood), white (complete absence of color), and tarry black. Only the first poop that babies pass on the first day of life, called meconium, is always tarry black and is normal. At any other time of life, black tarry stools are abnormal and are a sign of potential internal bleeding and should always be discussed with your child's health care provider, as should blood in poop (also not normal) and white poop (which could indicate a liver problem).

Normal pooping behavior for a newborn can be grunting, turning red, crying, and generally appearing as if an explosion is about to occur. As long as what comes out after all this effort is a soft poop (and normal poop should always be soft), then this behavior is normal. Other babies poop effortlessly and this, too, is normal.

Besides its color, another topic of intense fascination to many parents is the frequency and consistency of poop. This aspect is often tied in with questions about **diarrhea** and **constipation.** Here is the scoop:

It is normal for newborns to poop during or after every feeding, although not all babies poop this often. This means that if your baby feeds 8-12 times a day, then she can have 8-12 poops a day. One reason that newborns are seen every few weeks in the pediatric office is to check that they are gaining weight normally: that calories taken in are enough for growth and are not just being pooped out. While normal poop can be very soft and mushy, **diarrhea is watery and prevents normal weight gain**.

After the first few weeks of life, a **change in pooping frequency** can occur. Some formula fed babies will continue their frequent pooping while others decrease to once a day or even once every 2-3 days. Some breastfed babies actually decrease their poop frequency to once a week! It turns out that breast milk can be very efficiently digested with little waste product. Again, as long as these babies are feeding well, not vomiting, acting well, have soft bellies rather than hard, distended bellies, and are growing normally, then you as parents can enjoy the less frequent diaper changes. Urine frequency should remain the same (at least 6 wet diapers every 24 hours, on average) and is a sign that your baby is adequately hydrated. Again, as long as what comes out in the end is soft, then your baby is not "constipated" but rather has "decreased poop frequency."

True constipation is poop that is hard and comes out as either small hard pellets or a large hard poop mass. These poops are often painful to pass and can even cause small tears in the anus. You should discuss true constipation with your child's health care provider. A typical remedy, assuming that everything else about your baby is normal, is adding a bit of prune or apple juice, generally ½ to 1 ounce, to the formula bottle once or twice daily. True constipation in general is more common in formula fed babies than breastfed babies.

Adding solid foods generally causes poop to become more firm or formed, but not always. It DOES always cause more odor and can also add color to poop. Dr. Kardos still remembers her surprise over her eldest's first "sweet potato poop" as she and her husband asked each other, "Will you look at that? Isn't this exactly how it looked when it went IN?" If constipation, again meaning hard poop that is painful to pass, occurs during solid food introductions, you can usually help by giving more prunes and oatmeal and less rice and bananas to help poop become softer and easier to pass.

Potty training can trigger constipation resulting from poop

withholding. This poop withholding can result in backup of poop in the intestines which leads to pain and poor eating. Children withhold poop for one of three main reasons.

They are afraid of the toilet or potty seat.

They had one painful poop and they resolve never to repeat the experience by trying to never poop again.

They are locked into a control issue with their parents. Recall the truism “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.” This applies to potty training as well.

Treatment for stool withholding is to QUIT potty training for at least a few weeks and to ADD as much stool softening foods and drinks as possible. Good-for-poop drinks and foods include prune juice, apple juice, pear juice, water, fiber-rich breads and cereals, beans, fresh fruits and vegetables. Sometimes, under the guidance of your child’s health care provider, medical stool softeners are needed until your child overcomes his fear of pooping and resolves his control issue. For more information about potty training we refer you to our post with podcast on this subject.

Our goal with this blog post was to highlight some frequently-asked-about poop topics and to reassure that most things come out okay in the end. And that’s the real scoop.

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