



Official reprint from UpToDate®
www.uptodate.com ©2014 UpToDate®



Patient information: Bloody stools (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What are bloody stools? — “Stools” is another word for “bowel movements.” If you have bloody stools, you might see bright red blood:

- On the toilet paper after wiping
- In the toilet after you go to the bathroom
- On the surface of or mixed in with your bowel movements

In some cases bloody stools look like black tar rather than like they have blood on them. Stools that look like tar are usually caused by bleeding high up in the digestive system ([figure 1](#)).

What causes bloody stools? — The 2 most common causes are not usually serious:

- Hemorrhoids – These are swollen blood vessels in the anus. Hemorrhoids can itch or hurt.
- Anal fissures – These are tears in the skin on the anus.

Sometimes, bloody stools are serious. They can be a sign of cancer or other problems in the digestive system.

What other symptoms should I watch for? — These symptoms can show what is causing your problem and if it is serious:

- Itching or pain in the anus
- Feelings of ripping or burning during bowel movements
- Fever, weight loss, and heavy sweating at night
- Diarrhea
- Feeling like you need to have a bowel movement, but not being able to go
- Belly pain
- Bowel movements that look black or dark red
- Changes in how often or how hard or soft your bowel movements are
- Bleeding that goes on for a long time or that comes back again and again

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — See your doctor or nurse right away if you notice any blood with your bowel movements. Most cases are not serious. But anyone with bloody stools should be seen by a doctor or nurse.

Are there tests I should have? — Your doctor or nurse will decide which tests you should have based on your age, other symptoms, and individual situation.

Here are the most common tests doctors use to find the cause of bloody stools:

- Rectal exam – Your doctor will look at the outside of your anus. He or she will also use a finger to feel inside the opening.
- Anoscopy – In his or her office, your doctor will put a small tube into your anus. The tube goes a few inches into the rectum (the lower part of the large intestine). It has a light on it so the doctor can see inside.

- Sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy – For these tests, the doctor puts a thin tube into your anus. Then, he or she advances the tube into your large intestine. The large intestine is also called the colon. The tube has a camera attached to it, so the doctor can look inside your intestines. During these tests, the doctor can also take samples of tissue to look at under a microscope ([figure 2](#)).

How are bloody stools treated? — Treatment depends on what is causing your bloody stools. You might not need treatment. If you do, treatments might include:

- Fiber supplements and medicines to keep your bowel movements soft
- Sitting in warm water a few times a day for about 15 minutes
- Creams and medicines that go on or inside your anus. These help with pain, itching and swelling.
- More serious medicines for diseases of the digestive system

Can bloody stools be prevented? — If you have hemorrhoids, you can reduce the chances of getting bloody stools again by drinking lots of water and eating lots of fiber. Fiber is common in fruits, vegetables, and breakfast cereal ([table 1](#)).

What if my child gets bloody stools? — In children and babies, bloody stools can be a symptom of:

- Tears in the anus (anal fissures) from large or hard bowel movements
- A condition that makes it hard to digest milk or soy
- Infection by a virus or bacteria, or food poisoning
- Diseases that affect the digestive system
- Foods and medicines that look like blood but aren't ([table 2](#))

If you notice blood in your child's diaper or bowel movements, take him or her to see the doctor or nurse.

More on this topic

[Patient information: Hemorrhoids \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Anal fissure \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Constipation in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Constipation in children \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: GI bleed \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Blood in the stool \(rectal bleeding\) in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Bloody stools in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Anal fissure \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Hemorrhoids \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

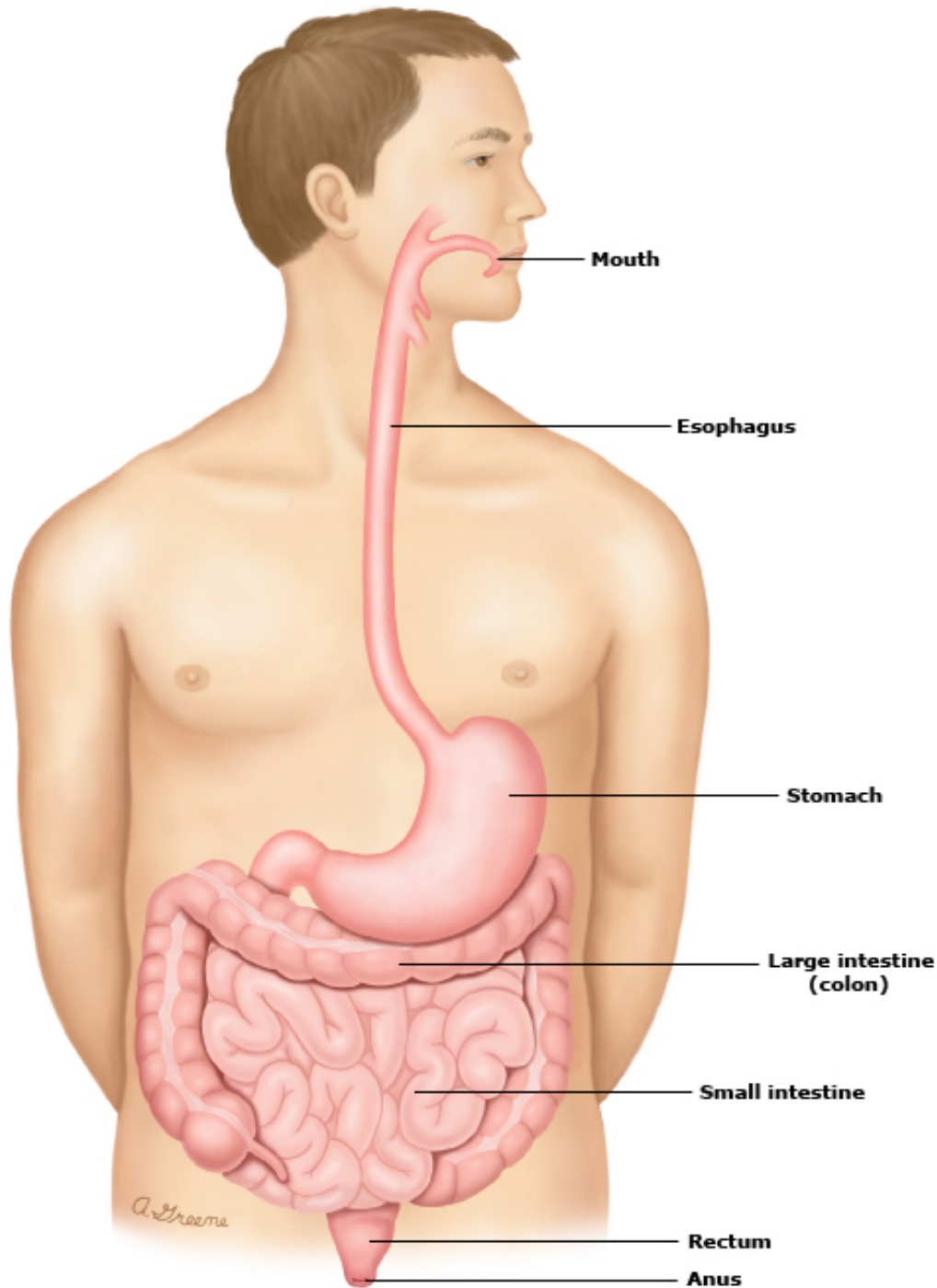
This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Sep 22, 2014.

The content on the UpToDate website is not intended nor recommended as a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your own physician or other qualified health care professional regarding any medical questions or conditions. The use of UpToDate content is governed by the [UpToDate Terms of Use](#). ©2014 UpToDate, Inc. All rights reserved.

Topic 15403 Version 4.0

GRAPHICS

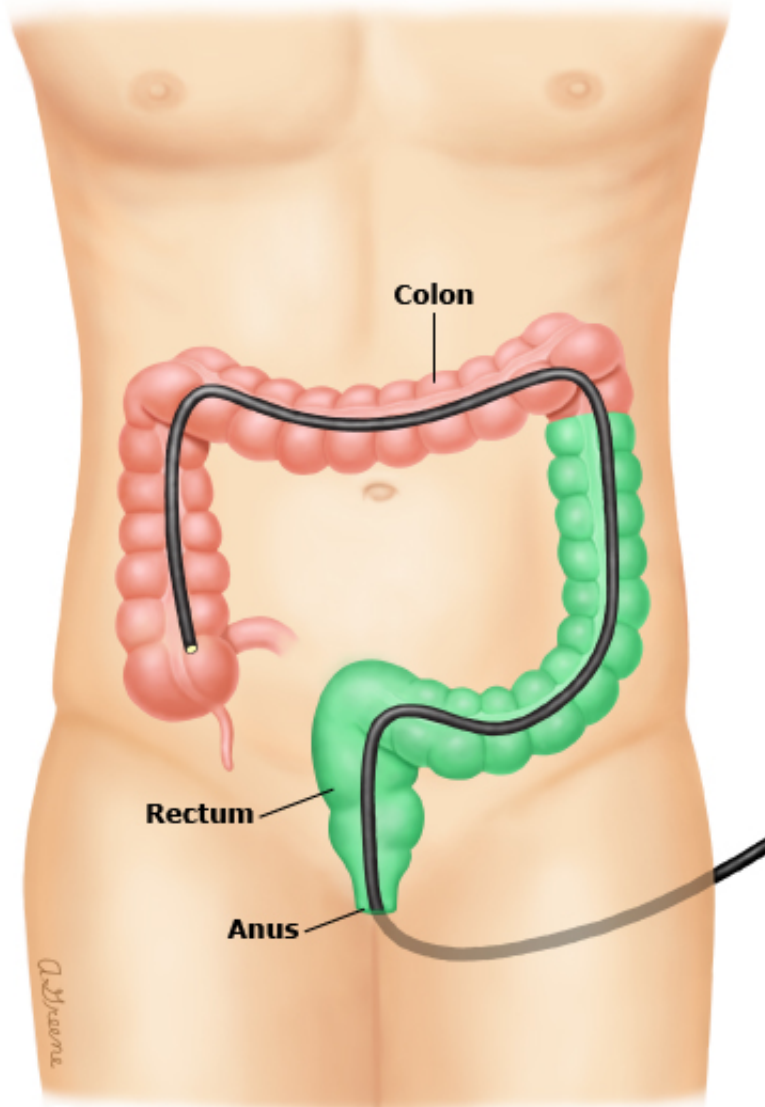
Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

Graphic 66110 Version 4.0

Colonoscopy versus sigmoidoscopy



During a colonoscopy or a sigmoidoscopy, you lie on your side, and the doctor or nurse puts a thin tube with a camera into your anus (from behind). Then the doctor or nurse advances the tube into the rectum and colon. The camera sends video pictures from inside your colon to a television screen.

A colonoscopy allows the doctor to see the whole colon (shown in pink and green). A sigmoidoscopy allows the doctor to see only the last part of the colon (shown in green).

Graphic 58734 Version 4.0

Amount of fiber in different foods

Food	Serving	Grams of fiber
Fruits		
Apple (with skin)	1 medium apple	4.4
Banana	1 medium banana	3.1
Oranges	1 orange	3.1
Prunes	1 cup, pitted	12.4
Juices		
Apple, unsweetened, w/added ascorbic acid	1 cup	0.5
Grapefruit, white, canned, sweetened	1 cup	0.2
Grape, unsweetened, w/added ascorbic acid	1 cup	0.5
Orange	1 cup	0.7
Vegetables		
Cooked		
Green beans	1 cup	4.0
Carrots	1/2 cup sliced	2.3
Peas	1 cup	8.8
Potato (baked, with skin)	1 medium potato	3.8
Raw		
Cucumber (with peel)	1 cucumber	1.5
Lettuce	1 cup shredded	0.5
Tomato	1 medium tomato	1.5
Spinach	1 cup	0.7
Legumes		
Baked beans, canned, no salt added	1 cup	13.9
Kidney beans, canned	1 cup	13.6
Lima beans, canned	1 cup	11.6
Lentils, boiled	1 cup	15.6
Breads, pastas, flours		
Bran muffins	1 medium muffin	5.2
Oatmeal, cooked	1 cup	4.0
White bread	1 slice	0.6

Whole-wheat bread	1 slice	1.9
Pasta and rice, cooked		
Macaroni	1 cup	2.5
Rice, brown	1 cup	3.5
Rice, white	1 cup	0.6
Spaghetti (regular)	1 cup	2.5
Nuts		
Almonds	1/2 cup	8.7
Peanuts	1/2 cup	7.9

To learn how much fiber and other nutrients are in different foods, visit the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Nutrient Database at:
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search/>.

Created using data from the USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference. Available at <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search/>.

Graphic 52349 Version 3.0

List of foods and medicines that can make a child's bowel movements look bloody

These foods and medicines can make stools look red, like fresh blood

Certain antibiotics*

Beets

Flavored gelatin (red colored)

Kool-Aid

Red licorice

These foods and medicines can make stools look black, like old blood

Stomach medicines that contain bismuth (like Pepto-Bismol)

Chocolate

Iron supplements

Lots of dark green foods

* In some cases antibiotics can cause real bleeding. If your child has bowel movements that look bloody after taking antibiotics, call the doctor.

Graphic 61276 Version 5.0