

Collecting a stool sample

Your GP or another healthcare professional may ask you for a stool sample to help them diagnose or rule out a particular health condition.

Stool is also sometimes called faeces or poo, it contains bacteria and other substances that are in the digestive system. The digestive system is made up of the gastrointestinal tract (GI tract). The parts of the body that make up the GI tract include the mouth, oesophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, and anus. The liver, pancreas, and gallbladder are the solid organs of the digestive system.

By testing the levels of these substances and bacteria in your stool, it's possible to work out what's happening in your digestive system.

For example, the sample can be tested to help diagnose:

- Gastroenteritis - a common condition that causes diarrhoea and vomiting and is usually the result of a bacterial or viral tummy bug
- Clostridioides difficile infection (also known as C.diff) is a type of bacteria which can be found in the large bowel which can cause diarrhoea and most commonly affects people who have recently been treated with antibiotics. C.diff infections can be unpleasant and can sometimes cause serious bowel problems, but can usually be treated with another course of antibiotics
- Inflammatory bowel disease such as Crohn's disease, a condition that causes inflammation of the lining of the digestive system, and ulcerative colitis, a condition where the colon and rectum become inflamed

How should I collect a stool sample?

You should:

- collect your stool sample in a clean container
- store the container in a fridge in a sealed plastic bag if you can't hand it in straight away

Collecting a stool sample

You should be provided with a plastic (specimen) container to use from the person requesting the stool sample.

To collect the sample:

- At the start wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water and dry them
- Label the container with your name, date of birth and the date (with a label provided or write your details on the container)
- place something in the toilet to catch the stool, such as an empty clean container

- make sure the stool sample doesn't touch the inside of the toilet
- using the container provided to you aim to fill around a third of it - that's about the size of a walnut, you may find it easier to use a disposable spoon to place the stool in the container
- put anything you used to collect the stool sample in a plastic bag, tie it up and put it the bin
- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water and then dry them

Follow any other instructions your doctor has given you.

Returning your stool sample

- The person requesting the stool sample should provide you with further details on how and where to return the sample to. Check what time of day the specimens are collected to be transported to the laboratory. Your sample should be handed in as soon as possible.
- Your stool sample must be fresh - if it is not, the bacteria in it can multiply. This means the levels of bacteria in the stool sample won't be the same as the levels of bacteria in your digestive system.

Storing a stool sample

- If you can't hand your sample in immediately, find out how long it can be kept in the fridge. Your GP or the healthcare professional who requested the test will be able to tell you. If you can store it in the fridge, put the container in a sealed plastic bag first, this must be a bag that can be sealed.

If you have any further questions, please contact your GP or the health professional who has requested the sample.

If you would like this information in another language or format, please contact the Your Experience Team on freephone 0800 694 5530. Alternatively you can email wcnt.yourexp@nhs.net

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