

The Color of SNOT

Nasal mucus can be annoying. It's always in your face. Worse, it occasionally emerges. Sometimes accompanied by noodles.

We expel nasal mucus by blowing it into a handkerchief. We never peek afterwards. That's considered bad manners. But sometimes it happens.

The color of mucus can tell us what's going on in the nasal passages. Here are the various hues and what they could mean for you:



Clear – You're normal. Straight mucus is mostly water, with proteins, antibodies and dissolved salts. Your nasal tissues produce it 24/7. Most of it flows down the back of your throat to be dissolved in the stomach.



White – You're congested. Swollen, inflamed tissues in your nose are slowing the flow of mucus, causing it to lose moisture and become thick and cloudy. Can be a sign of a nasal infection or cold.



Yellow – Your cold or infection is progressing. Infection-fighting cells might be rushing to the site of the microbial infection. White blood cells are among them. Once exhausted, they're carried off on the mucosal tide, lending it an ochre tinge. Colds inevitably last 10-14 days. Hunker down and wait it out.



Green – Your immune system is really fighting back. The mucus is thick with dead white cells and other wreckage from the battle. If you're still sick after about 12 days, you may want to see a doctor. It could be sinusitis, a bacterial infection. If you're feverish or nauseated, see a doctor soon.



Pink or red – This is blood. Nasal tissue in the nose has somehow become broken — perhaps because it is dry, irritated or suffered some kind of impact. You didn't stick anything up there, did you?



Brown – Could be blood. More likely it's something inhaled, like dirt, snuff or paprika.



Black – If you're not a smoker or user of illegal drugs, black mucus may mean a serious fungal infection. These infections usually occur in people with compromised immune systems. If you are one of them, you're probably already seeing a doctor. If not, go.

BONUS FACTS:



You produce and swallow about 1.5 quarts of nasal mucus daily.



Doctors rarely use nasal mucus in the primary diagnosis of disease.



You know how your nostrils get super-runny on a cold day? And how one drop sometimes hangs from the tip of your nose? That's mostly water that has condensed out of the cold air passing over warm nasal tissues. It's not snot. Or not much.



Wegener's granulomatosis is a rare disease, whose symptoms include a nosebleeds and a constantly runny nose with pus-filled discharge.

Sources:

cdc.gov/getsmart/campaign-materials/print-materials/FactSheet-RunnyNose.html
webmd.com/allergies/features/the-truth-about-mucus



Cleveland Clinic

clevelandclinic.org/HealthHub