

## Nose-Colored Glasses: See what's wet and runny, kind of funny, except when it's not

By Scott LaFee | August 31, 2017

**O**rdinarily, talk about snot would mucus sick, but that's exactly the point. Each day, our bodies produce roughly 1.5 quarts of the stuff to do things like keep delicate tissues and membranes moist and lubricated or trap invasive bacteria and dust like liquid flypaper.

Over an average lifetime, we will all produce approximately 6,500 gallons of mucus — roughly the amount contained in a large tanker truck — most of which will drip, drain and dribble down our throats, unseen and unnoticed.

The exception, of course, is when we get a runny nose, often a sign of an impending cold or infection. Then, it's right there for everyone to see. When that happens, mucus is often multi-hued, changing colors with our condition.

But what does this variegated viscosity actually say about your health — is this a case of us versus phlegm?



**Clear:**  
Normal,  
usually.  
Nasal  
mucus  
is mostl  
y  
water,  
with a  
dash  
and  
dollop

of inorganic salts, enzymes, proteins, antibodies and the occasionally shed cell. When healthy,

mucus-making tissues lining your mouth, nose, throat, sinuses, lungs and gastrointestinal tract churn out 1 to 1.5 liters of the stuff daily. Most of it trickles unnoticed down your throat into your stomach. Sometimes nasal mucus can remain clear while an infection occurs elsewhere, such as the sinuses or ears.

**White:** Nasal tissues are inflamed and swollen, mucus flow diminishes and loses moisture, causing it to thicken and cloud. May be a sign of an infection or cold.

**Yellow:** You're fighting an infection. Your immune system has ramped up production of infection-fighting cells, primarily leukocytes or white blood cells with names like neutrophils, eosinophils, lymphocytes and monocytes with specific targets (bacteria or fungi) or functions (triggering an inflammatory response). Neutrophils, for example, kill bacteria by ingesting them. Once exhausted, they are flushed out with mucus.

**Green:** The battle within your body is raging full-force. Your mucus is thick with dead white cells (their duty done) and the detritus of bio warfare. The thicker the mucus, the greener it likely is.

**Pink or red:** Mucus tinged with red blood cell, probably from a leaking capillary in the nose which has somehow ruptured due to tissue dryness, irritation (blowing your nose a lot) or some kind of impact injury. You've kept your fingers at your sides, haven't you?

**Brown:** It could be blood, more of it or older, but more likely it's something inhaled, such as dirt, snuff or smoke. A small amount isn't worrisome; a lot might be cause to consult your physician.

**Black:** If you're not a smoker or user of illegal drugs, this may be an indicator of a serious fungal infection, which most often occur in persons with compromised immune systems. See a doctor.

**Last thing to nose:** There is no precise medical or scientific name for snot. Officially, snot is simply dried nasal discharge or mucus that is no longer, well, mucus-y. Some have referred to snot as "rhinoliths," derived from the Latin words for nose and stone, but a rhinolith is, in fact, a concretion of material, usually mineral salts, that forms around a small foreign body in the nasal cavity, not unlike a pearl forming in an oyster. Thankfully, true rhinoliths are rare.

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