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## Diagnose everyday health symptoms

Written By Michele Bender / Published January 20, 2012 / Real Simple



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Every day, your body tells you all kinds of things: Scratch my elbow. I'd like some salt. But hidden in these signals can be deeper messages about your health. Here's how to decode them.

### What You Can Learn From the Whites of Your Eyes

*If they look grayish:* It's probably just a result of the natural aging process, which can make the whites of your eyes (formally known as sclerae) become grayer.

"The sclera thins over time, so the deep vascular tissue underneath shows through," says Christopher Coad, an ophthalmologist at Chelsea Eye Associates, in New York City. That said, there are some serious medical conditions that can turn your whites gray, including [rheumatoid arthritis](#) and brittle bone syndrome. As a starting point, schedule an exam with your ophthalmologist, who may refer you to a specialist.

*If they look red:* Most likely, your eyes are dry. Those red squiggles you see are tiny blood vessels, which become more prominent when eyes are irritated.

"Dryness can be a result of age, staring at the computer, or environmental factors, like air-conditioning," says Coad. Preservative-free artificial tears (sold at drugstores) help lubricate eyes with ingredients like glycerin and can soothe irritation; use four to six times daily, as needed. If the dryness worsens, see your ophthalmologist, as "dry eyes can be a [symptom](#) of conditions like thyroid disease and diabetes," says Coad. If you also have itching and tearing, allergies may be to blame; try an over-the-counter antihistamine.

*If they look yellow:* It may be jaundice, which is caused by a high level of bilirubin, a by-product of red blood cells. See a doctor right away, as jaundice can be a sign of several serious health problems, including liver

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### What You Can Learn From Your Sleep Habits

If you fall asleep as soon as your head hits the pillow: Surprise, surprise—you're probably sleep deprived, says Dr. James Herdegen, the medical director of the Sleep Science Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It takes a well-rested person about 10 to 15 minutes to fall asleep. Ideally, aim for eight hours or so a night. If you already get that much, see your doctor to rule out sleep-onset conditions such as restless [legs syndrome](#).

*If you wake up a lot at night:* You may have sleep maintenance insomnia, in which the difficulty isn't falling asleep but staying asleep. The disorder has been linked to anxiety, depression, and sleep apnea. If you toss and turn or experience daytime sleepiness for more than four weeks, see your doctor, who may refer you to a [sleep specialist](#).

### What You Can Learn From Your Cravings

*If you crave salt:* You may need some stress relief. Your constant search for a salt fix could signal that your adrenal glands, which pump adrenaline and other hormones into your blood when you're feeling anxious, have been working so hard that they're temporarily exhausted.

"The adrenal glands produce a hormone that holds sodium in your body, so if they're not making enough of that hormone, you may crave salt," says Dr. Susan Blum, the founder and director of the Blum Center for Health, in Rye Brook, N.Y. To keep stress in check, try exercise, meditation, or just saying no to yet another PTA request.

*If you crave fat:* It's well-known that eating sweets and simple carbohydrates can lead to the infamous sugar crash that leaves you craving more. Consuming fat has a similar self-perpetuating effect, says Sarah Leibowitz, an associate professor of neurobiology at Rockefeller University, in New York City. "Eating fatty foods stimulates the brain to produce peptides that make you crave more fat," she says. A recent study at the Scripps Research Institute, in Jupiter, Fla., showed that rats who were fed high-fat foods (bacon, icing) began eating more and more—a hallmark of addictive behavior. (They actually refused nutritious food when it was offered.) Fight the urge for chips by eating plenty of lean protein and low-fat dairy products, which will help you feel more satisfied.

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### What You Can Learn From Your Hair

*If your hairline is receding:* If you have a family history of thinning, you might be experiencing female pattern [hair loss](#) (androgenetic alopecia), which occurs in 30 to 40 percent of women. A dermatologist can prescribe medication or a topical treatment to help. It's also worth noting that your ponytail may be too tight, tearing strands from the hairline and creating a condition called traction alopecia.

*If your part seems wider than usual:* Your body could be under stress. (But be aware: Losing a handful of hairs a day—or about 100 strands—is normal.) A significant physical event, such as surgery, childbirth, or even a dramatic weight loss, can cause hair follicles to shift into a resting state and temporarily stop growing. Stay calm: Once you fully recover, your hair will gradually return.

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### What You Can Learn From Your Mouth

*If your gums are swollen or bleed:* "You may have periodontal disease," says Greg Diamond, a periodontist in New York City. About 75 percent of people over the age of 40 do. "Most people think nothing of it if they spit blood after flossing," says Diamond, but your gums should never bleed. And though periodontal disease may not be painful, the bacteria that create it have been linked with systemic problems, like strokes and heart disease. So keep up with your professional cleanings (twice yearly), flossing (daily), and brushing (ideally, after every meal).

*If you have whitish or reddish dots on the back of your tongue:* Have your primary-care physician or dentist test you for the human papilloma virus (HPV), which is on the rise. HPV is tricky to detect and typically goes away on its own, but in some cases it can lead to cancer of the mouth, throat, or cervix. So if you do have the virus, you'll need to be monitored going forward.

*If your tongue is smooth and shiny and you can't see your taste buds:* You may be lacking in vitamin B12, says Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum, the Kona, Hawaii-based author of *Beat Sugar Addiction Now!* Cracks at the corners of your mouth may also signal a B vitamin deficiency, says Minka Schofield, an otolaryngologist at Ohio State University Medical Center, in Columbus.

### What You Can Learn From Your Skin

*If it suddenly turns dry and itchy:* It could be a reaction to a new skin-care product. If you can rule that out, have your thyroid and iron levels checked. "Dry skin can signal low thyroid levels or anemia," says Ava Shamban, a dermatologist in Beverly Hills and the author of *Heal Your Skin*. Your primary-care physician or dermatologist can run simple blood tests and refer you to a specialist if necessary.

*If you break out on your jawline:* Your hormones may be in overdrive. Acne in this area is common for women in their 30s and 40s—even those who have always had clear skin—especially right before their periods. Treat it with a traditional over-the-counter cream containing salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide. If that doesn't work, "have your hormone levels checked by your ob-gyn," says Elizabeth Hale, a clinical associate professor of dermatology at the New York University Medical Center, in New York City. Often hormonal acne can be improved with medications such as oral contraceptives.

*If you have a rash that won't go away:* It might be mild [eczema](#), which can show up as a result of stress. To soothe the itch, apply a lotion containing ceramides several times daily, or see your dermatologist for a prescription strength nonsteroidal calming cream. Another option: Slather on olive oil, says Shamban.

"It adds essential fats to the skin and has anti-inflammatory properties that can help with eczema."

### What You Can Learn From Your Urine

*If it's pale yellow or clear:* You're well hydrated. "It shows that you're drinking enough water to dilute your urine, which is naturally yellow," says Blum.

*If it's dark yellow:* Start doubling your water intake, downing herbal tea, and eating a few servings of water-rich fruit, like cantaloupe, daily. If you've taken a multivitamin in the last 24 hours, bright yellow urine sometimes means your body is doing a good job of absorbing it. When you take a multivitamin, your body uses what it needs and excretes the rest, so if you see neon urine, the vitamin has successfully passed through your system, says Blum. "If your urine is very pale after taking a multivitamin, you might not be absorbing it properly," she says. In that case, switch to a quick-absorbing vitamin capsule or powder. They're easier for the body to break

down than tablets.

*If it's cloudy:* You could have a bladder or kidney infection. "Cloudiness indicates the presence of white blood cells, which your body sends to fight off infection," says Blum. See your ob-gyn or primary care physician for a proper diagnosis.

If you see blood or it's very dark in color: If you had any doubts, we'll state it for the record: See your doctor (that is, unless you are menstruating). "Blood and darkness could be signs of various illnesses, from bladder infections to kidney disease," says Blum.

### What You Can Learn From Your Feet

*If your heels or arches hurt when you walk:* You may have flatfeet, which means your arches collapse more than they should when you put weight on them. "Flatfeet can lead to knee and lower-back pain," says podiatrist James Christina, the director of scientific affairs for the American Podiatric Medical Association. Try over-the-counter arch support inserts, and if the pain persists, see a podiatrist.

*If they cramp up when you walk:* This could be a sign of peripheral artery disease, in which blood doesn't effectively circulate to the extremities. "Poor circulation can lead to lactic acid buildup in the foot muscles, which causes cramps," says Christina. See a podiatrist right away for an initial diagnosis.

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