



**badgut.org**  
Gastrointestinal Society  
Canadian Society of Intestinal Research



# Poop Anxiety SURVEY RESULTS

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## Background

Everybody poops, it's a daily occurrence for much of the population. Yet, so many people experience shame and anxiety around the process. While most of us have no problem using public washrooms to urinate, having a bowel movement in a public toilet can cause a ton of stress. This is known as poop anxiety, or parcopresis. It isn't just standard public washrooms either, some individuals find it difficult to poop anywhere that another person might be near, including in their own home.

It can be even more difficult to deal with poop anxiety if you have a gastrointestinal condition, such as inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), celiac disease, or lactose intolerance. Individuals who experience frequent diarrhea, constipation, and intestinal gas might face more embarrassment than others because of the added awkwardness of having atypical bowel movements. And those who have to go frequently might always be worried about both finding a public washroom and the act of using it. Some people even worry about being judged for having poop anxiety, as they might have friends or family who make fun of their inability to use public washrooms. The severity of poop anxiety can vary between individuals, with some just feeling slightly uncomfortable and others finding it impossible to go anywhere outside their home due to anxiety.

## Method

The GI Society hosted a short survey on badgut.org and mauxdeventre.org from September 13-29, 2021, and shared

it on social media and over email, to learn more about how people experience and manage poop anxiety. The survey was open worldwide to individuals of all ages and we received 667 respondents (566 English, 101 French).

## Results

### Demographics

The majority of our respondents were female (83%), between the ages of 55-74 (63%), and from Canada (87%). Many had a digestive condition, with the most common being IBS (38%), constipation (33%), diarrhea (25%), hemorrhoids (20%), and lactose intolerance (15%). We also asked respondents if they had a diagnosed anxiety condition and 29% said yes, 28% might have an anxiety disorder but were not diagnosed, and 43% had no anxiety condition.

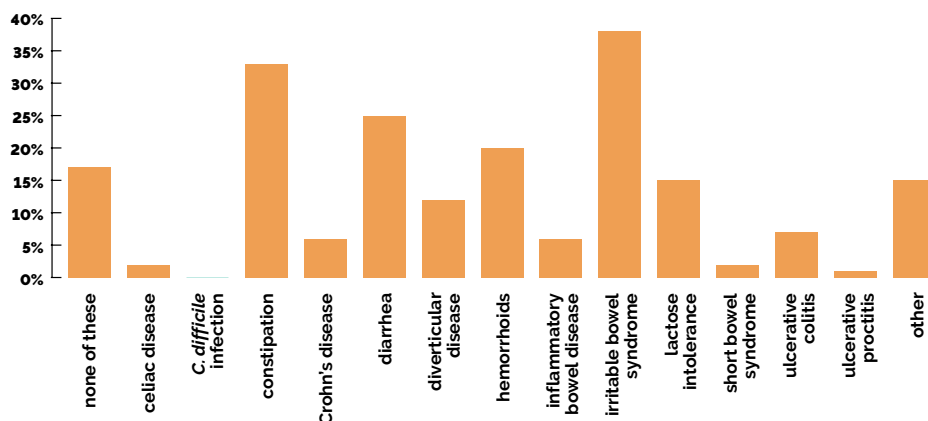
### Where

In our survey, poop anxiety was quite common across a wide range of spaces. People were most often anxious in public washrooms (52% indicating frequent anxiety and 29% saying they sometimes had anxiety in this location) and at friends' homes (50% yes and 29% sometimes). Many respondents indicated anxiety using the washrooms at work (36% yes and 19% sometimes), which is especially difficult as these are often the only washrooms people have access to for many hours each day. Alarming, 4% indicated that they were always anxious using their own washroom at home, and 14% were sometimes anxious pooping at home. For some individuals, this anxiety is so bad that they are physically unable to defecate in these situations. One respondent

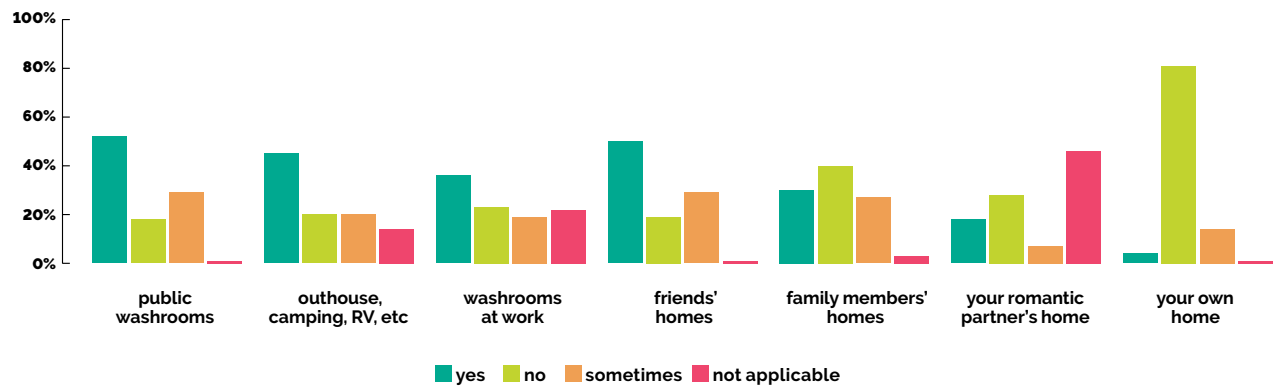
### Do you look before you flush?

In our survey, 69% claimed to always look in the toilet, 26% sometimes, 5% rarely, and less than 1% never take a peek. Looking at your stools is a good idea, as you will be able to notice any alarming symptoms (e.g., blood or mucus) and keep track of your general trends (e.g., soft or hard stools).

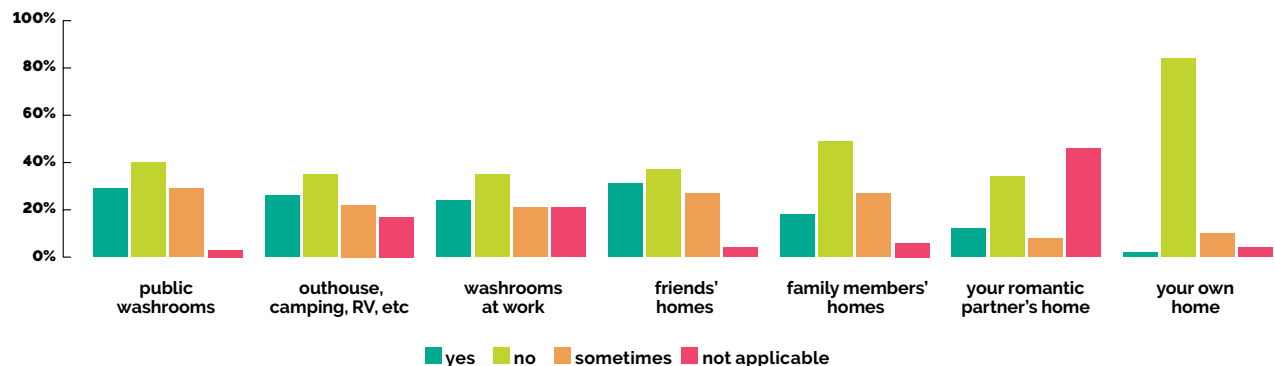
### Do you have any of the following conditions that affect your bowel movements?



### Does pooping in the following locations make you anxious?



### Do you find that your anxiety makes it physically difficult or impossible to poop in these situations?



said, “my anxiety about using the washroom in public or at others’ houses will often cause me to have diarrhea, (or softer poops at least), which makes the situation even more anxiety-inducing and potentially embarrassing.”

#### Why

But why, specifically, are people so embarrassed to poop in public? The top reasons, according to our respondents, included being embarrassed by the smell (66%) or sounds (57%), worrying that it would take a long time (43%) or be messy (36%), or that the toilet wouldn’t flush (35%). Some other reasons that respondents wrote in include not making it to the toilet in time due to diarrhea and urgency, worrying about germs/filth in public toilets, physical discomfort in small toilet stalls, concern over whether there will be enough toilet paper, and not being able to clean properly (e.g., no bidet or running tap in stall).

#### Managing Anxiety

While feeling anxious is common, the ways people address it can vary. For example, 43% of respondents will use the washroom despite anxiety, 39% will use washrooms that they deem comfortable (such as single occupancy toilets), 31% will just hold it, and 22% will rush home. For 19% of respondents, poop anxiety makes them avoid going out in the first place, so that they aren’t put in this situation. As one respondent said, “I often head out only to have to turn around and get home to poop. I worry I won’t get home in time. I will then just stay home and I get frustrated. I’m afraid to be in a vehicle for longer than ½ hour in case I have to poop as there may be nowhere to go. I feel that I am turning into a recluse as I’m afraid to go out.”

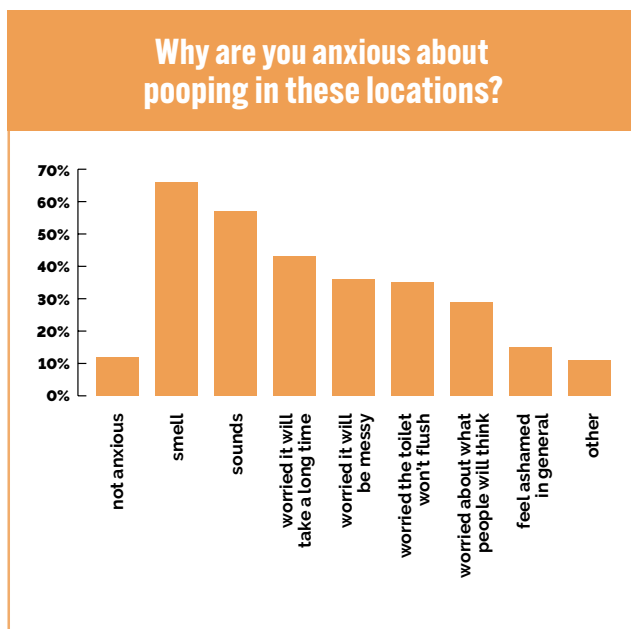
#### GI Conditions and Poop Anxiety

In open-ended questions, a few individuals with IBD

indicated that they stopped feeling anxious using public washrooms when they developed IBD symptoms because using a public washroom is less distressing and embarrassing than having an accident. “When you have Crohn’s – you don’t have a choice of when and where to poop. The only time I get anxious is when I poop my pants – honestly, not enough washrooms available.” However, those with IBD were overall more likely to experience anxiety using the washroom, especially at friends’ homes. Of those with IBD, 67% indicated that they are regularly anxious and 33%

sometimes anxious using a friend’s washroom. They were also more likely to use public washrooms despite anxiety, with 56% indicating they would use any washroom even if they were uncomfortable doing so.

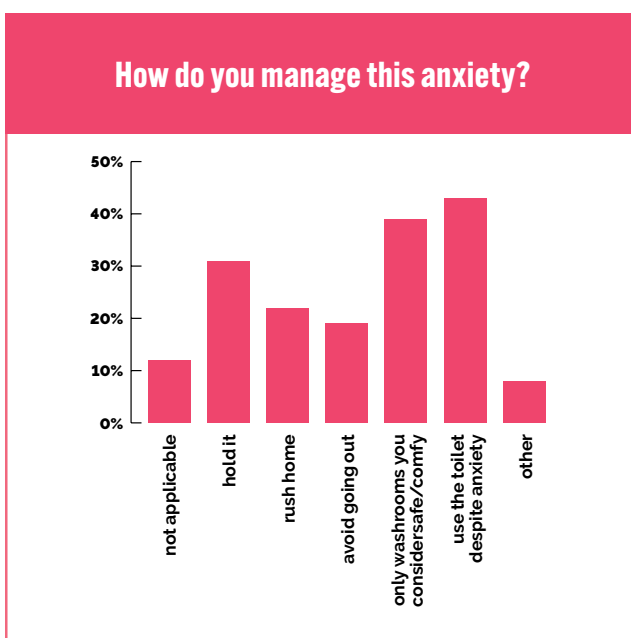
It can also be difficult for individuals with IBS, a different gastrointestinal condition, who are more likely than the general population to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. In the words of one respondent: “Because of the IBS I get panic attacks and they result very often in a terrible urge to poop which is difficult to hold back. Everywhere I go I always make sure there is a washroom nearby.”



## Conclusion

In the current environment full of pandemic fears, anxiety is naturally higher. We see poop anxiety resulting from social taboos around noises and smells that are a natural part of life. While it’s sad that so many are anxious about a natural body function, we understand that we need to encourage and support our friends and colleagues through their fears. It’s okay. Everybody poops.

Note: We have rounded percentages to the nearest whole number.



## Please Note

The Gastrointestinal Society does not intend that this report replace the knowledge or diagnosis of your physician or healthcare team, and we recommend seeking advice from a medical professional whenever a health problem arises.

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