

Diarrhea

Diarrhea (liquid stool) can be caused by many things. It is important to treat the cause of diarrhea. This handout explains some of the causes and also shares self-care and treatment options.

Radiation

Radiation treatment to the abdomen affects the lining of your colon. This may cause diarrhea, which can be treated with over-the-counter loperamide (Imodium®). You can also get Lomotil® by prescription. These medicines slow the movement of stool through the intestine.

Surgery

Surgery that removes part of the intestine may result in frequent stools. Often these stools are soft and formed, not liquid. To help slow down stools, take Imodium or Lomotil at the time your doctor or nurse suggests. Taking medicinal fiber, such as psyllium (Metamucil®) or methylcellulose (Citrucel®) with two ounces of water slows the movement in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. The fiber absorbs excess fluid like a sponge. Hold liquids for one hour after taking medicinal fiber. When you take the right amount of psyllium, other medicines may not be needed. As you increase the dose of psyllium, decrease the amount of Imodium or Lomotil.

Spicy and deep fried foods and hot liquids can cause frequent bowel movements (BMs) after surgery. The BRAT diet is helpful in slowing movement in the GI tract. The BRAT diet includes bananas, white rice, applesauce and dry toast.

Chemotherapy (Chemo)

Certain types of chemo drugs cause diarrhea. Ask your doctor how to control diarrhea. You may be told to take Imodium. However, do not take Imodium if you are being checked for *C. difficile* or other bacteria. When taking Imodium, do not take more than eight tablets (16 milligrams) per day. Read the label on the package. Do not take over-the-counter medicine for diarrhea unless your health care team says it is okay.

If you took fiber before you started chemo, it may not be needed during your treatment. Ask your health care team.

Medicines

Some medicines can cause diarrhea. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before taking the following:

- Antacids that are magnesium based.
- Laxatives.
- Aldomet (methyldopa).
- Non-steroidal drugs.
- Theophylline.
- Reglan (metoclopramide).
- Cytotec (misoprostol).
- Medicines with artificial sweeteners, such as sorbitol or xylitol.

Food Allergies

Eating foods you are allergic to can cause diarrhea. You should stop eating any foods that cause diarrhea. Discuss your food allergies with your health care team.

Lactose Intolerance

You may have diarrhea if your body cannot digest milk. Some people do not have the needed enzyme to break down milk. Milk products include yogurt, cheese, cottage cheese and ice cream. If you get gas or bloating after consuming dairy products, you can take an enzyme (Lactaid®) or you can stop eating or drinking milk products.

Infections and Parasites

Certain types of bacteria and parasites can cause diarrhea. Your doctor may request a stool specimen to help determine further treatment.

Antibiotic Therapy

Antibiotics, medicines used to treat an infection, may cause diarrhea by destroying the bacteria that normally live in the intestine. If you have diarrhea when you take antibiotics, try to:

- Eat two servings of yogurt that contain acidophilus or live cultures daily. Avoid yogurt that can cause your gastrointestinal (GI) tract to become more active (such as those containing bifidus regularis).
- Drink buttermilk.
- Take acidophilus or lactobacillus in pill form if approved by your health care team. You can get it in pharmacies or health food stores.
- Ask about over-the-counter products that can help with diarrhea that is caused by antibiotics.

Impaction

An impaction is the collection of a large amount of stool in the colon. A severe impaction can cause diarrhea. Diarrhea occurs when liquid stool seeps around the blockage. Do not take anti-diarrhea medicine because the impaction will get worse.

Other Causes

Diarrhea may also be caused by:

- Alcohol, caffeine and enteral nutrition (tube feeding) supplements.
- Gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach).
- Diverticulitis (inflammation of areas in the intestine).
- Irritable bowel syndrome.
- Adding medicinal fiber too fast to your diet may increase diarrhea, cramping and bloating.

Unknown Causes

If you have diarrhea and don't know the cause, talk to your health care team. Your treatment will vary depending on the cause of the problem.

Nutrition and Diarrhea

Regardless of the cause, follow these tips when experiencing diarrhea:

- Drink eight to 12, eight ounce glasses of fluids every day. Diarrhea can make you dehydrated if you don't drink enough. If your urine is dark, you are not drinking enough.

- Sodium and potassium are lost when you have diarrhea. Eat salted crackers, pretzels or broth to replace sodium. Include high-potassium foods such as orange juice, potatoes (no skin) and bananas as tolerated. Low carbohydrate electrolyte drinks also help replace electrolytes. Some examples include half strength Gatorade® or Powerade® (equal parts of drink and water), G2® (Gatorade product), Pedialyte® and CeraLyte-70®.
- Eat small frequent meals.
- Limit high-fiber foods, such as peas and beans, seeds, whole grains and high-fiber fruits and vegetables or those with thick peels/skins.
- Limit high-fat foods, including fried foods, rich desserts (pies, cakes and cookies) and excessive amounts of butter, oil and cream.
- Hot fluid (including soups) may make diarrhea worse. Allow hot fluids to cool to room temperature before eating.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and spicy foods which cause food to move more quickly through the intestines.
- For some people, milk and other dairy products make diarrhea worse. You may need to limit or avoid these foods until the diarrhea stops. Cultured milk products such as yogurt, buttermilk and hard cheeses may be better tolerated. Lactose free milk or the use of lactase enzyme supplements (Lactaid) may be used instead.
- Limit use of sugar-free gums and candies that contain sorbitol or xylitol.

Self Care

The following tips will help with self care:

- Keep track of the amount and frequency of bowel movements.
- Clean the anal area with mild soap or use baby wipes after each bowel movement. Rinse well with warm water. Pat the skin dry.
- Apply a water-repellent ointment, such as A&D Ointment® or petroleum jelly to the anal area.
- Sit in a tub of warm water or a sitz bath to reduce anal discomfort.
- Protect the bed and chairs. Use pads with plastic backing under the buttocks where the patient will lie down or sit.

Report to Your Doctor

You should tell your doctor when you have any of the following:

- Four or more loose bowel movements a day with no improvement in two days.
- Blood in or around anal area or in stool.
- Weight loss of five or more pounds after the diarrhea starts.
- New belly pain or cramps for two days or more.
- No urine for 12 hours or more.
- Unable to drink liquids for 24 hours or more.
- Puffy or swollen belly.
- Constipation for several days followed by diarrhea, which could suggest an impaction (severe constipation).

Resources

You may benefit from a visit with a dietitian. Ask for a referral.

You can also visit the American Cancer Society website at:

<http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatmentsandsideeffects/physicalsideeffects/dealingwithsymptomsathome/caring-for-the-patient-with-cancer-at-home-diarrhea>