

# Diarrhea

## Overview

Watery stools or loose, thin stools may happen as a result of cancer treatment. If it continues, other health problems such as fluid loss, electrolyte loss, rectal pain and itching may happen. This handout explains some of the causes of diarrhea. It also shares self-care and treatment options.

## Prevention

- Drink 2-3 liters of fluid a day. Tell your doctor if you cannot drink this much.
- Try not to eat or drink anything with caffeine.
- Take a fiber powder that dissolves in water. Take it each day.
- If you start having gut cramps and loose stools, follow the low-fiber food plan.
- You should not eat fatty foods, foods high in fiber and some dairy products. These foods can worsen loose stools.
- Stay on the low-fiber food plan for one to two weeks after your radiation therapy, chemo or drug treatment is done.
- All milk products have lactose (a milk sugar). Chemo and/or radiation therapy to the belly or pelvic area can sometimes prevent the digestion of milk products. This can also lead to cramping, swelling



or loose stools. Eating and drinking less lactose (milk) can lessen these symptoms.

- Tell your doctor if you keep having loose stools or they get worse.

## Causes and Treatment

### Radiation

Radiation treatment to the abdomen affects the lining of your colon. This may cause diarrhea. Treat with loperamide (brand name Imodium, available without a prescription). You can also get Lomotil

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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 2 ounces of water slows the movement in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. The fiber absorbs excess fluid like a sponge. Do not drink liquids for one hour after taking medicinal fiber Metamucil/ Citrucel. When you take the right amount of psyllium, other medicines may not be needed. As you increase the dose of psyllium, decrease the dose of Imodium or Lomotil.

Spicy foods, deep-fried foods and hot liquids can cause frequent stooling 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. 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. Take over-the-counter medicine for diarrhea only if your medical care team says it is OK.

If you took fiber before you started chemo, this may not be needed during chemo. Ask your medical care team.

### **Medicines**

Some medicines can cause diarrhea. Ask your medical care team before taking these:

- Antacids that are magnesium-based
- Laxatives
- Aldomet (methyldopa)
- Nonsteroidal drugs
- Theophylline
- Reglan (metoclopramide)
- Cytotec (misoprostol)
- Medicines with artificial sweeteners (sorbitol or xylitol)

### **Food Allergies**

Eating foods that you are allergic to can cause diarrhea. You should stop eating foods that cause diarrhea. Discuss your food allergies with your healthcare 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 from milk or milk products, drink or take 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 know which medicine will work.

## Antibiotic Therapy

Antibiotics (medicines to treat bacterial infections) may cause diarrhea by destroying the bacteria that normally live in the intestine. If you have diarrhea when you take antibiotics, try these tips:

- 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 Culturelle in pill form if approved by your healthcare team. You can get it in pharmacies or health food stores.

Ask about over-the-counter products that can help with diarrhea caused by antibiotics.

## Impaction

An impaction is the collection of a large amount of body waste (called 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 of Diarrhea

- Alcohol, caffeine and enteral nutrition 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 do not know the cause, talk to your healthcare team. Your treatment will vary depending on the cause of diarrhea.

## Nutrition and Diarrhea

Regardless of the cause of diarrhea, follow these tips:

- Drink 64 to 96 ounces of fluids every day. Diarrhea can make you dehydrated if you do not drink enough. If your urine is dark, you are not drinking enough.



- Electrolytes such as 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.

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- Limit high-fiber foods: examples are peas and beans, seeds, whole grains, high-fiber fruits and vegetables or those with thick peels/skins.
- Limit high-fat foods: examples are 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.
- Milk and other dairy products may make diarrhea worse. You may need to limit or avoid these foods until 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 of limiting milk and other dairy products.
- Limit the use of sugar-free gums and candies that contain sorbitol or xylitol.

## Self-Care

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

## Report to Your Doctor...

- If you have six or more loose bowel movements a day with no improvement in two days.
- If you have blood in or around anal area or in stool.
- If you lose five pounds or more after the diarrhea starts.
- If you have new belly pain or cramps for two days or more.
- If you don't urinate for 12 hours or more.
- If you are unable to drink liquids for 24 hours or more.
- If you have a puffy or swollen belly.
- If you experience constipation for several days followed by diarrhea, which could suggest an impaction (severe constipation).