

Diarrhea

Diarrhea (also called liquid stool) is a symptom that can be caused by many things. It is important to treat the cause of diarrhea. This handout explains some of the causes of diarrhea and how to treat it.

Causes and Treatment

Radiation

Radiation treatment to the abdomen affects the lining of your colon. This may cause diarrhea. Treat this by taking loperamide (brand name Imodium[®], available without a prescription). 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. These stools are often soft and formed, not liquid.

Try these solutions to help slow stools:

- Take Imodium or Lomotil at the time your doctor or nurse suggests.
- Take medicinal fiber, such as psyllium (Metamucil[®]) or methylcellulose (Citrucel[®]) with 2 ounces of water. The fiber absorbs excess fluid like a sponge. **Do not** drink liquids for 1 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 dose of Imodium or Lomotil.
- Add foods from the BRAT diet to your normal diet. These include **b**ananas, white **r**ice, **a**pplesauce and dry **t**oast.
- Avoid spicy foods, deep fried foods and hot liquids. These can cause frequent stooling after surgery.

Chemotherapy

Certain types of chemotherapy (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 8 pills (16 milligrams) per day. Read the package label and follow directions. Take over-the-counter medicine for diarrhea **only** if your health care team says it is OK.

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

Medicines

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

- Antacids that contain magnesium
- Laxatives

- Aldomet[®] (methyldopa)
- Theophylline
- Cytotec[®] (misoprostol)
- Non-steroidal medicines
- Reglan[®] (metoclopramide)
- 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 health care team.

Lactose Intolerance

You may have diarrhea if your body cannot digest lactose, the sugar in dairy foods. Some people do not have the enzyme needed to digest lactose. Dairy products include milk, yogurt, cheese, cottage cheese and ice cream. If you get gas or bloating after eating dairy products, you can take the over-the-counter product Lactaid[®]. You may also try lactose-free dairy foods available in most grocery stores.

Infections and Parasites

Certain types of bacteria and parasites can cause diarrhea. To help with treatment options, your doctor may request a stool sample from you.

Antibiotic Therapy

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

- Eat 2 servings of yogurt that contain acidophilus or live cultures daily. Avoid yogurt that can cause your gastrointestinal (GI) system 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 buy it in drug stores or health food stores.

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

Impaction (Severe Constipation)

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

Other Causes

- Alcohol and caffeine
- Tube feeding formula that is given too quickly
- Gastroenteritis - inflammation of the stomach
- Diverticulitis - inflammation of areas in the intestine
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Adding medicinal fiber too fast to your diet may cause more diarrhea, cramping and bloating. For more information, ask for the handout **Medicinal Bulk-Forming Fiber**.

Unknown Causes

If you have diarrhea and do not know the cause, talk with your health care team. Your treatment will vary depending on the cause of diarrhea.

Nutrition and Diarrhea

Regardless of the cause of diarrhea, follow these guidelines:

- Drink 8 to 10 cups (64 to 80 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.
- 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® (mix equal parts of drink and water), G2® (sugar-free Gatorade), Pedialyte® and CeraLyte-70®.
- Eat small, frequent meals every 2 to 3 hours.
- 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 such as fried foods, rich desserts (pies, cakes, cookies), and foods with large amounts of butter, oil or cream.
- Drinking hot fluids (including soups) may make diarrhea worse. Allow hot fluids to cool to room temperature.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and spicy foods which cause food to move more quickly through the intestine.
- Milk and other dairy products that contain lactose **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 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 Tips

- After each bowel movement, clean your anal area with a mild soap. Rinse well with warm water. Pat the skin dry. Or, you may want to 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 help soothe the area.
- Protect furniture by using pads with plastic backing where you lie down or sit.

When to Call Your Doctor



Report any of these symptoms to your doctor:

- You have 6 or more loose bowel movements a day and this does not get better in 2 days.
- You have blood in your stool or around your anal area.
- You lose 5 pounds or more after the diarrhea starts.

- You have new belly pain or cramps for 2 days or more.
- You do not make urine for 12 hours or more.
- You are unable to drink liquids for 24 hours or more.
- You have a puffy or swollen belly.
- You have constipation for several days followed by diarrhea, which could be caused by an impaction.

Resources

If you would like to meet with a dietitian, contact your care team for a consult, send a message through MyChart or call the Department of Clinical Nutrition at 713-563-5167.

Bowel Management Class

Attend this free class. You will learn how to promote good bowel health and how to prevent and manage constipation and diarrhea. For information, visit The Learning Center for a class schedule.