



Managing Diarrhea

Diarrhea is the passage of loose or watery stools three or more times a day with or without discomfort. It happens when the water in the intestine is not being absorbed back into the body for some reason. Sometimes, diarrhea can be caused by an overflow of intestinal liquids around stool that is lodged in the intestine (impaction). Other causes can include infections; surgery; anxiety; side effects of chemotherapy; radiation therapy to the abdomen; or medicines; supplemental feedings that contain large amounts of vitamins, minerals, sugar, and electrolytes; and tumor growth. Diarrhea caused by chemotherapy or radiation therapy may last for up to three weeks after treatment ends.

What the patient can do

- Try a clear liquid diet (water, weak tea, apple juice, peach nectar, clear broth, popsicles, and plain gelatin) as soon as diarrhea starts or when you feel that it's going to start. Avoid acidic drinks, such as tomato juice, citrus juices, and fizzy soft drinks.
- Eat frequent small meals.
- Try small amounts of low-fiber foods, e.g., rice, bananas, applesauce, yogurt, mashed potatoes, low-fat cottage cheese, and dry toast when the diarrhea starts to improve.
- Eat foods high in potassium (bananas, potatoes, apricots) which is an important mineral often lost through diarrhea.
- If diarrhea lasts longer than two days, start a liquid diet and add low-fiber foods, as tolerated.
- Monitor the amount and frequency of your bowel movements.

- Clean your anal area with a mild soap after each bowel movement, rinse well with warm water, and pat dry.
- Inspect anal area for red, scaly, broken skin.
- Apply a water-repellent ointment, such as A&D Ointment to the anal area.
- Take medicine for diarrhea or skin irritation as recommended by your doctor.

Do Not

- Eat foods that may stimulate/irritate the digestive tract
 - Whole grain breads/cereals or bran
 - Fried or greasy food
 - Nuts
 - Raw fruits or vegetables
 - Rich pastries/candy, or jellies
 - Strong spices/herbs
 - Caffeinated, alcoholic, or carbonated drinks
 - Milk/milk products
 - Very hot/very cold foods

When to Call the Doctor

- Six (6) or more loose bowel movements per day, for more than two (2) days
- Blood in/around anal area or in stool
- Weight loss of 5 lbs or more after diarrhea starts
- New abdominal cramps/pain lasting 2 or more days
- Inability to urinate for 12 or more hours

- Refusal (inability) to drink liquids for more than 2 days
- Fever
- Suddenly puffy or bloated abdomen
- Constipation for several days accompanied by a small amount of diarrhea or oozing of fecal material

What caregivers can do

- See that the patient drinks about 3 quarts of fluids each day
- Keep a record of bowel movements to help decide when to call the doctor
- Check with the doctor before using any over-the-counter diarrhea medicine. Many of these contain compounds that are like aspirin, which can worsen bleeding problems.
- Check the anal area for red, scaly, broken skin.

Excerpted from Passport to comfort - Managing diarrhea - patient. City of Hope.

<http://www.cancer.org> - From the American Cancer Society

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