



Dehydration and Lack of Fluids

The cells in your body must have a certain amount of liquid to function well. This is called **hydration** or being hydrated.

When you don't have enough fluid in your body or do not have enough where it's needed in the body it is called **dehydration**.

What causes dehydration?

When your body puts out more fluid than it takes in, you can become dehydrated. A person can become dehydrated for many reasons, whether they have cancer or not. It can happen because a person does not eat or drink enough, or because they are losing excessive amounts of fluids.

Here are some conditions or side effects that can lead to dehydration in a person who has cancer:

- [Vomiting](#)¹
- [Diarrhea](#)²
- [Fever](#)³ with or without an infection
- Bleeding
- [Loss of appetite](#)⁴ or simply not taking in enough fluids; Keep in mind that fluid comes from both food and drink, so a person who isn't eating must drink more to make up the difference.
- Procedures and surgeries can cause fluid to be lost

What to look for

- Dry mouth and lips
- Thirst
- Dizziness or weakness
- Trouble swallowing dry food
- Dry, sticky mouth that makes it hard to talk
- Dry skin, skin that “tents” (stays up) when lightly pinched
- A swollen, cracked, or dry tongue
- Higher than normal body temperature with or without chills
- Rapid weight loss (See [Weight Changes](#)⁵)
- Little or no urine
- [Constipation](#)⁶
- [Fatigue](#)⁷
- Sunken eyeballs
- Poor appetite and no thirst (Dehydrated people often feel less hungry and thirsty.)

What the patient can do

- Keep a food and fluid diary.
- Drink fluids. Sometimes iced fluids are easier.
- Remember that food contains fluid. Try to eat fruits, vegetables, soups, gelatins, Popsicles, and other moist foods.
- Use lotion often to soften dry skin.
- Try to get rid of the cause of dehydration, such as [vomiting](#)⁸, [diarrhea](#)⁹, or [fever](#)¹⁰. (See these sections for information on these causes.)
- Apply lubricant to lips to avoid painful cracking.
- Fill a small cooler with juice boxes, bottled water, or other drinks and keep it next to you, if it's tiring to get up.
- Suck ice chips to relieve dry mouth if you can't drink enough liquid.

What caregivers can do

- Offer cold or cool liquids every hour or so. If the patient is very weak, try giving liquids with a small medication syringe that you can get at a pharmacy.
- Encourage the patient to eat small meals several times a day if they can.
- Include moist foods, soups, and fruit smoothies (made with ice in a blender) as

snacks.

- Keep an intake and output diary by tracking food and fluid intake and by watching the urine output.
- Check the patient often to be sure they haven't become confused.
- When the patient stands up after sitting or when getting up from bed, encourage them to do it slowly. Stand nearby, in case they get dizzy or feel faint.
- If the patient gets dizzy or feels faint, offer fluids and have them sit or lie down.

Call the cancer care team if the patient

- Can't take in or hold down liquids
- Has vomiting, diarrhea, or fever that last for more than 24 hours
- Has urine that's either very dark or only comes in a small amount, or if there's no urine for 12 hours or more
- Has dizziness or faints when standing up, even after drinking fluids
- Becomes confused or disoriented

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/nausea-and-vomiting.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/diarrhea.html
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/low-blood-counts/fever.html
4. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/eating-problems/poor-appetite.html
5. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/eating-problems/weight-changes.html
6. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/constipation.html
7. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/fatigue.html
8. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/nausea-and-vomiting/nausea-and-vomiting.html
9. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/diarrhea.html

10. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/fever.html

References

Besser J, Grant BL, American Cancer Society. *What to Eat During Cancer Treatment*. Atlanta, GA: American Cancer Society; 2018.

Gallegos C, Brito-de la Fuente E, Clave P, Costa A, Assegehagn G. Nutritional aspects of dysphagia management. *Adv Food Nutr Res*. 2017;81:271-318.

National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN). Clinical practice guidelines in oncology: Palliative care. Version 2.2019. Accessed at www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/pdf/palliative.pdf on January 21, 2020.

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