

What to Do for Diarrhea

Diarrhea is passing loose or watery stools many times a day with or without discomfort. It happens when water in the bowel (colon or intestine) isn't being absorbed back into the body. Diarrhea can lead to loss of appetite, dehydration, belly pain, infection, and weakness.



What causes diarrhea in people with cancer?

Many things can cause diarrhea in a person with cancer, including:

- Chemotherapy, targeted therapy, or immunotherapy
- Radiation therapy to the abdomen (belly)
- Infection
- Some medicines
- Some kinds of cancer, such as pancreatic, gastric, and colorectal
- Surgery that takes out part of the bowels
- Stress
- Eating foods that may not agree with you
- Blockage in part of the bowel that only lets liquid stool by



How is diarrhea treated?

Managing diarrhea includes treating the cause as well as the symptoms you might be having. For example:

- Diarrhea from an infection might need antibiotics or other medicine.
- Antidiarrheal medicines might be used if the cause of the diarrhea isn't an infection.
- Steroids are used for diarrhea caused by immunotherapy.
- If you are very dehydrated from diarrhea, you may need fluids and electrolytes.



What can you do to help manage diarrhea?

Ask your cancer care team if you are likely to have diarrhea for any reason. If you begin having diarrhea, these tips may help.

Try eating and drinking these things:

- Clear liquids, such as water, weak tea, apple juice, clear broth, and clear gelatin
- Salty foods, such as broths, sports drinks, crackers, and pretzels
- Foods high in potassium, such as some fruit juices like apple juice and nectars, sports drinks, potatoes with the skin, and bananas
- Small meals that are easy to digest, like rice, noodles, skinless chicken, white toast, mashed potatoes, low-salt soup, and well-cooked eggs

Do not eat, drink, or use these things:

- Foods that are very hot or spicy
- Acidic drinks, such as tomato juice, citrus juices, prune juice, and fizzy drinks
- High-fiber foods, like nuts, seeds, whole grains, beans and peas, dried fruits, and raw fruits and vegetables
- High-fat foods, such as fried and greasy foods
- Drinks with caffeine or alcohol
- Sugar-free chewing gum and candies made with sugar alcohol (i.e., sorbitol, mannitol, or xylitol)
- Pastries, candies, rich desserts, and jellies
- Milk or milk products. Yogurt and buttermilk are usually OK.
- Tobacco



What can you do to feel better?

- Sip liquids all day to help prevent dehydration. Try Popsicles, gelatin, and ice chips. Ask your cancer care team what a safe amount of liquids is for you.
- Eat small meals and snacks often during the day.
- Try to drink at least 1 cup of liquid after each loose bowel movement.
- Clean your bottom after each bowel movement with damp tissue paper and mild soap, rinse, and pat dry. Or use unscented baby wipes to clean yourself.
- Apply a water-repellent ointment, such as vitamins A&D ointment or petroleum jelly, to your bottom.
- Sit in a tub of warm water or a sitz bath.



What else can you do?

- Keep a record of your bowel movements to report to your cancer care team.
- Take medicine for diarrhea as directed by your cancer care team.
- Check with your cancer care team before using any over-the-counter diarrhea medicine.
- Once the diarrhea has stopped, start small regular meals. Slowly start eating foods that contain fiber.



When to talk with your cancer care team

- You have loose bowel movements many times a day, unless your cancer care team told you to expect it.
- You have 7 or 8 loose stools in 24 hours.
- You are dizzy or feel like you may pass out.
- The diarrhea doesn't get better or gets worse while you are taking the medicine your cancer care team told you to take.
- You have blood in your stool or around your anus.
- You don't urinate (pee) for 12 or more hours.
- You can't keep liquids down for 24 hours or more.
- You have new belly pain, cramps, or a swollen belly.
- You have a fever. Your cancer care team will tell you what temperature a fever is.
- You've been constipated for several days and then start to pass small amounts of liquid stool.



When to call 911 or go to the ER

Call 911 or go to the emergency room if you:

- Have bleeding from your rectum that won't stop
- Have sudden, intense belly pain that won't stop
- Can't urinate (pee) or eat for a day or more



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/diarrhea or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

