



Diarrhea

What is diarrhea? Diarrhea, or frequent and watery bowel movements, is experienced by everyone from time to time. When it occurs, it may be accompanied by abdominal pain, loss of appetite, and nausea, and sometimes with other symptoms, such as vomiting and fever. Usually when diarrhea occurs, it lasts a few days and then goes away.

But diarrhea sometimes becomes chronic, lasting three weeks or longer, or occurs often for shorter periods of time over many months. Chronic diarrhea can sometimes be difficult to treat and can lead to distress. A person may be unable to function and may develop feelings of anxiety or depression as a result of uncontrolled diarrhea.

What Causes Diarrhea?

Common types of diarrhea, which usually lasts for no more than a few days, is most often caused by an infection (“intestinal flu” or “stomach flu”) or by spoiled food. Occasionally, diarrhea of this type is a side effect of a medicine or is caused by excessive use of a laxative.

When the cause of diarrhea is most likely one of these problems, a doctor will advise a patient to remove the cause if possible, drink plenty of fluids, eat small amounts frequently during the day, and wait a few days until the diarrhea goes away. Sometimes, a physician will recommend an anti-diarrhea medication that can be found over-the-counter in the pharmacy.

Chronic Diarrhea

When diarrhea is chronic, it can be caused by many possible illnesses or conditions. Some of these are serious problems and others are not. Some of the causes are:

- Inflammation of the intestines (such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn’s disease)

- Chronic infection of the intestines (such as some parasites)
- Diseases that interfere with blood flow to the intestines
- Diseases that interfere with digestion in the intestines (such as lactose intolerance)
- Diseases that interfere with normal motion of the intestines (such as irritable bowel syndrome or IBS)
- Use of some medications, including overuse of laxatives
- Some cancers
- Other diseases like diabetes or an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism)

To help chronic diarrhea, a doctor will first try to find the right diagnosis and determine whether there is a disease that can be treated. Whether or not there is a disease that can be treated, the doctor may recommend a number of things that you could do.

What May Help?

- You can take an over-the-counter medicine to stop diarrhea such as Pepto-Bismol or Imodium. Ask your pharmacist or doctor, and follow the instructions on the package.
- Drink fluids to avoid dehydration. It is difficult to know how much is required to replace the fluid in the diarrhea. Even if you are not thirsty, it is usually best to frequently drink glasses of water, clear soup, or fruit juice without pulp. Sports drinks replace some electrolytes lost in the diarrhea and also are good to drink.

- Eat small meals throughout the day, instead of less frequent big meals.
- It may help to eat foods that have electrolytes that may be lost in the diarrhea, such as bananas, potatoes without the skin, and fruit juices.
- Avoid foods that are high in fiber.
- Avoid alcohol, beverages with caffeine, and sodas.
- If you have skin irritation, itching, burning, soreness, or pain in your rectal area, try these tips to feel better: Take a warm bath. Afterwards, pat the area dry with a clean, soft towel, and apply hemorrhoid cream or white petroleum jelly (Vaseline®) to the sore area.

Keep a Record

Your doctor may want you to keep a record of your bowel movements so that he or she may be able to change your treatment as necessary.

When Should I Call My Doctor?

Call or visit your doctor if any of the following problems occur:

- Blood in your diarrhea or black, tarry stools
- A fever that is high (above 101° F) or that lasts more than 24 hours
- Severe diarrhea lasting longer than 2 days
- Nausea or vomiting that prevents you from drinking liquids to replace lost fluids
- Severe pain in your stomach or rectum

Also visit or call your doctor if you have any of these signs of dehydration (not enough water):

- Dizziness when you try to stand
- Fainting
- Very fast heart rate
- Feeling confused

Patient Education Series

Diarrhea

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.