

Diarrhea

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is frequent, loose, or watery bowel movements. This may happen several times a day with or without discomfort, including gas, cramping, and bloating.¹ Diarrhea is a common side effect, occurring in 3 out of 4 people who receive chemotherapy, and can be life-threatening if it leads to dehydration, malnutrition, and electrolyte imbalances.^{1,2} Diarrhea may last for up to 3 weeks after treatment.³

Why does cancer treatment cause diarrhea?

- Chemotherapy works by destroying cancer cells. Unfortunately, when treatment affects the lining of healthy cells in the digestive tract, it can cause diarrhea.^{1,4}
- Treatment changes the distribution of body fluids by⁴:
 - Decreasing absorption of fluid in the body
 - Increasing fluid in the bowels

What effect can diarrhea have on me?

Besides the symptoms listed above, you may experience the following due to low levels of potassium and sodium⁴:

- Palpitations or irregular heartbeat
- Headaches
- Tiredness
- Nausea
- Muscle cramps

What should I be aware of if I have diarrhea?

If you have diarrhea, it is very important to have the proper amount of fluids in your body and recognize any changes that may be a result of dehydration. Call your doctor or nurse if you experience:

- Dry mouth or excessive thirst⁵
- Dizziness or weakness⁵
- Weight loss of 5 pounds or more^{5,6}
- Little or no urine^{5,6}
- Stomach cramps lasting 2 or more days⁶
- Puffy or bloated stomach⁶

What should I be aware of if I have diarrhea?

- Try a diet of clear liquids (such as water, clear broth, and apple juice)
- Eat small meals frequently
- Eat foods or drink beverages rich in potassium (such as bananas, apricots, potatoes, and sports drinks)
- Try eating small amounts of low-fiber food when diarrhea starts to improve (such as white rice, noodles, and dry toast)
- Do not eat whole-grain cereals and breads, or food made with bran
- Do not drink beverages containing caffeine, carbonated drinks, milk, or alcohol
- Do not eat greasy, fried, or spicy foods

The information contained herein is not comprehensive and is intended only as a guide.

It is important to talk to your doctor or nurse if diarrhea continues for more than 24 hours, or if you have pain and cramping along with diarrhea, so that it can be treated promptly.

Choosing Foods

Bland foods such as rice and pasta are binding foods that can help make your stools more firm. Eating small amounts of food at a time may also help you feel less gassy and bloated. Eat several small meals throughout the day rather than 3 large meals. Use the chart below to select foods that can help you manage diarrhea.

Choose:	Instead of:
Rice, wheat, or oatmeal cereal	High-fiber cereals containing bran or whole grain
Chicken or turkey (white meat, without the skin), beef, or fish	Diary foods (cheese, yogurt, cottage cheese)
White bread	Whole-grain breads
Rice, pasta, and potatoes (without the skin)	High-fiber vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and beans
Ripe bananas, pureed vegetables, and canned or cooked fruits such as applesauce or canned pears	Raw vegetables, fresh or dried fruits, pickles, relishes, nuts, and popcorn
Jam or jelly	High-fat spreads (butter, cream cheese)
Baked or broiled foods	Greasy, fatty, or fried foods
Bland foods	Spicy foods (curry, hot pepper)
Hard candy or pound cake	Caffeinated foods (chocolate candy, brownies)
Animal crackers, pretzels	Butter cookies, doughnuts

Replacing fluids

When you have diarrhea, your body can lose a lot of fluid. To replace this fluid, you must drink at least 8 to 10 glasses (64 to 80 ounces of liquids each day). Drink a variety of liquids, including water, clear broths, clear fruit juices, and peach or apricot nectars. Use the chart below to select liquids that can help you manage diarrhea. Note: If you have diabetes, ask your healthcare provider which of the listed fluids are best for you.

Choose:	Instead of:
Water	Milk
Decaffeinated beverages (decaffeinated tea, coffee, and sodas)	Beverages that contain caffeine (coffee, tea, colas)
Clear broths (chicken or beef)	Creamy soups
Noncarbonated drinks, such as clear fruit juices (apple or cranberry juice)	Juices with pulp. Sodas with a lot of fizz (carbonation). Stir them first to get bubbles out.
Pedialyte, Gatorade, and other electrolyte-replacement drinks	High-sugar drinks such as Sustacal, Ensure, or carbohydrate-loading sports drinks
Lactose-free beverages such as soy milk or lactose-free dairy products (Lactaid)	Milk
Nonalcoholic beverages	Beverages that contain alcohol

Skin care

Uncontrolled diarrhea can cause pain and soreness to the skin around your anus. Try these tips to protect your skin and relieve pain.

- Clean the area often with unscented baby wipes or baby oil.
- Use warm sitz baths several times a day to soothe the skin. Available at your pharmacy, a sitz bath is a small tub that fits on the toilet seat. Fill it with warm water and sit in it for about 5 to 10 minutes.
- Gently pat the area dry after cleaning.
- Spread Desitin, Balmex, or A+D Ointment over the skin after each bowel movement. These ointments help to heal and protect your skin. Stop using them if they make your skin worse.
- Be sure to tell your nurse or doctor if your skin feels tender or sore.

Be prepared

Diarrhea can happen suddenly. To help prevent accidents, always use the bathroom at the first urge to go. If you are experiencing diarrhea, you may want to wear a pad. When you leave the house, pack a small bag of extra pads, baby wipes, ointment, and underwear. Use nightlights in your bedroom, hallway, and bathroom so you can safely find your way to the bathroom during the night. To help protect your mattress, purchase bed pads at your local medical supply store, or place a towel underneath your sheet. Most importantly, let your doctor or nurse know if you have accidents. This can be a sign that your treatment plan for diarrhea needs to be adjusted.

Other suggestions from your healthcare providers:

References: 1. American Cancer Society. Making treatment decisions: what are the possible side effects of chemotherapy? Available at http://www.cancer.org/docroot/ETO/content/ETO_1_4x_What_Are_The_Side_Effects_of_Chemotherapy.asp. 2. Saltz LB. Understanding and managing chemotherapy-induced diarrhea. *J Support Oncol*. 2003;1:35-46. 3. American Cancer Society. Coping with physical & emotional changes: diarrhea. Available at: http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MBC/content/MBC_2_3x_Diarrhea.asp 4. NCH Healthcare System. Chemotherapy-induced diarrhea. Available at <http://www.cancer.nchmd.org/treatment.aspX?section=chemotherapy&id=1002> 5. American Cancer Society. Coping with physical & emotional changes: fluids and dehydration. Available at http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MBC/content/MBC_2_3x_Fluids_and_Dehydration. 6. American Cancer Society. Coping with physical & emotional changes: what should I know and do about diarrhea? Available at: http://www.cancer.org/docroot/PN/answers/faq_about_diarrhea.asp.

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