

Physical Concerns - Diarrhea

Internet version of this handout with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/diarrhea>

Diarrhea is frequent, loose, or watery bowel movements (poop). This includes loose stools that are hard to hold in (incontinence) or just the need to have a bowel movement more often than usual. Your medical team may call the usual number of bowel movements you have in a day your “baseline.”

If you experience a change in your bowels, share it with your health care team to explore the best ways to manage it. Occasionally diarrhea can be caused by a treatable infection commonly acquired in hospital settings.

Relieving side effects is an important part of cancer care and treatment. This is called symptom management or palliative care. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you experience and any change in symptoms.

Risks of Diarrhea

Mild diarrhea usually does not result in serious problems, however can be uncomfortable. More significant diarrhea can cause dehydration and imbalance of electrolytes as a result of all of the water lost. Severe dehydration can lead to kidney failure, so it is best to prevent diarrhea or treat it as soon as it develops.

Prevention and Treatment of Diarrhea

The best prevention and treatment will depend on your symptoms and the cause of your diarrhea. Ask your doctor if you need medicines to prevent diarrhea such as loperamide (Imodium) or the prescription diphenoxylate/atropine (Lomotil). It is always best to consult with your doctor given your unique medical situation.

Consider these options to help you manage mild diarrhea:

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, dairy, fat, fiber, orange juice, prune juice, and spicy foods.
- Avoid medicines such as laxatives, stool softeners, and metoclopramide (Reglan). Metoclopramide is used to prevent nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy but can lead to looser stools at times.
- Eat small, frequent meals and choose foods that are very easy to digest such as bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast. Your doctor may recommend a low-residue diet, which includes low-fiber foods
- Drink water and other clear liquids to prevent dehydration. People with severe dehydration may need to receive intravenous (IV) fluids. This means that a health care provider gives fluid to the body through a vein.
- If diarrhea is caused by the pancreas not working well, replacing pancreatic enzymes may help. This occurs in some patients with pancreatic cancer.
- If diarrhea is caused by an infection as determined by your doctor, this can be treated effectively with an antibiotic prescribed by your doctor.
- For severe diarrhea from chemotherapy, ask your doctor about changing the schedule or dose of chemotherapy.

Adapted from: <https://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/diarrhea>

Resources for Additional Information:

- [Cancer.Net, Diarrhea](#)
- [NIH, Diarrhea and Cancer Treatment](#)
- [NIH, Gastrointestinal Complications \(PDQ®\)](#)
- [National Cancer Institute, Managing Chemotherapy Side Effects, Diarrhea](#)
- [Chemocare, Diarrhea and Chemotherapy and Cancer Treatment](#)
- [American Cancer Society Diarrhea Information](#)
- [CancerCare.org, Coping With Diarrhea](#)

Información Española

- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Diarrea](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Diarrea](#)
- [Chemocare, Diarrea y quimioterapia](#)