

Diarrhea


What it is

Diarrhea is 3 or more loose, watery bowel movements in 24 hours. Foods and liquids pass through the bowel (intestines) so quickly that your body cannot absorb enough nutrients, vitamins, minerals and water from them. This can cause your body to lose fluid (dehydration) and have chemical (electrolyte) imbalances. If this happens, you may need IV fluids to replace lost water and nutrients.

Why it happens

Diarrhea can be caused by cancer treatments such as chemo, radiation, surgery or biological therapy. These treatments can harm healthy cells in the lining of your large and small bowel. Diarrhea can also be caused by infections or other medicines.

Ways to manage diarrhea

- **Drink 8 to 12 cups of clear liquids each day.**
1 cup equals 8 ounces. Drink liquids slowly. Include popsicles, ice chips or sports drinks like Gatorade or Powerade. Try to drink 1 cup of fluid after each loose bowel movement.
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- **Eat 5 or 6 small meals each day instead of 3 large meals.**
 - **Eat foods and liquids that are high in sodium and potassium.**
When you have diarrhea, your body can lose these substances and it is important to replace them. Foods with sodium include bouillon, fat-free broth, pretzels, and crackers. Foods high in potassium include bananas, oranges, avocados, canned apricots, and baked, boiled or mashed potatoes.
 - **Eat low-fiber foods.** Low-fiber foods include plain or vanilla yogurt, white toast, white rice, eggs, saltine crackers, canned fruit, applesauce, well-cooked veggies, chicken or turkey (skinless and baked, broiled or grilled) and instant oatmeal.
 - **Have foods and drinks that are room temperature.**
 - **Ask your doctor if you should try a clear liquid diet.**
This can give your digestive system time to rest.

**Stay away from foods or drinks that can make diarrhea worse.
These include:**

- Very hot or very cold drinks
 - Milk products, unless they are low-lactose or lactose-free. Prolonged diarrhea lasting more than 2 days may cause a temporary lactose intolerance. If this happens, limit milk and dairy foods to no more than 2 cups per day. 1 cup equals 8 ounces. You can eat dairy products again after the diarrhea gets better.
 - Be careful with nutrition drinks like Boost or Ensure. Although they are lactose-free they may make diarrhea worse.
 - Fried, greasy or fatty foods
 - Spicy foods, such as curry, garlic, pepper, hot sauce, salsa and chili
 - Drinks that have a lot of sugar such as soda, fruit punch, prune juice, and orange juice and apple juice
 - Foods that are high in fiber such as:
 - Whole wheat breads
 - Whole grain cereals
 - Raw fruits and vegetables
 - Salads and leafy greens
 - Foods or drinks with caffeine such as regular coffee, tea, some sodas, and chocolate
 - Beer, wine, and other types of alcohol
 - Sugar-free products that contain malitol, xylitol or sorbitol. These are mostly found in sugar-free gums and candy. Read product labels to find out if they have these sweeteners in them.
 - Foods or drinks that can cause gas. These include cooked dried beans, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, cucumbers, melons, and carbonated drinks.
 - Nuts, seeds and popcorn
 - Tobacco
- **Keep your rectal area clean and dry after each bowel movement using mild soap and water.** Use a cream such as Desitin to protect your skin. **Tell your doctor or nurse if your rectal area is sore or bleeds or if you have hemorrhoids.**
 - **Ask your nurse if a warm sitz bath would be helpful for rectal pain.**

- **Ask your doctor if over-the-counter medicines, like Imodium may be used. Do not take any medicine for diarrhea without first asking your doctor or nurse.**
- **Ask to speak with a dietitian.** They can tell you food to eat and foods to avoid.
- **Keep track of your bowel movements on a calendar.** Include details about how often you have them and what they look like. If you're having diarrhea, it can be helpful to share these details with your doctor or nurse.

Call your doctor or nurse right away if you:

- Have 3 or more loose or watery bowel movements in a 24-hour period
- Cannot keep fluids down for 12 hours or more
- Feel faint or like you will pass out
- Have dark urine (pee) or do not pee for 8 hours or more
- Are told to take medicine to stop your diarrhea and it does not work
- Have belly pain, cramping or swelling
- Have bleeding from rectal area
- Have broken skin or sores near your rectum (bottom)
- Have a fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher or chills
- Have any signs of dehydration like: dizziness, feeling very tired or weak, like your heart is racing or skipping a beat, feeling very thirsty or not peeing as often as normal



Go to the nearest Emergency Room or call 911 right away if you:

- Faint or pass out
- Have bowel movements that are black or tar-like or have blood in them



This info is a general resource. It is not meant to replace your doctor's advice. Ask your doctor or health care team any questions. Always follow their instructions