

Diarrhea

Diarrhea is loose, watery, and frequent stool. Diarrhea is considered chronic (long term) when you have had loose or frequent stools for more than 4 weeks. Diarrhea is your body's way of cleansing itself from irritants. Patients on antibiotics, chemotherapy, and HIV medications, as well as those dealing with irritable bowel syndrome and gastroenteritis, often encounter diarrhea, and it may be a lifelong condition. Medications, stress, infections, poor food handling, excessive high-fiber foods, alcohol, and unusual, greasy, or junk foods also may cause diarrhea. Other causes of loose, watery stools and abdominal cramps are infections from viruses, bacteria, or parasites. Identifying the cause is important in order to avoid future problems. Management is different for each individual.

Tips to help you overcome your symptoms

- Drink plenty of liquids between meals, because dehydration is the most threatening problem. Water, broth, fruit juices, gelatin, ices, and sports drinks are good choices. Drink liquids at room temperature.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol, which can irritate your intestinal tract.
- Avoid dairy products when symptoms are most severe. Add low-fat or fat-free milk back into your diet slowly.
- Eat small meals and snacks, rather than big meals.
- Select food such as bananas, white or brown rice, applesauce, toast, and crackers. These foods contain soluble fiber, which is helpful in the digestion and absorption process.
- Do not eat foods that are greasy, fried, or fatty. Do not add butter, oil, or other fats to your foods.
- Avoid foods that may be hard to digest. Your gastrointestinal tract may be affected by foods that are high in insoluble fiber (raw fruits and vegetables and bran products), dried beans, cabbage, onions, nuts, and carbonated beverages. Avoid them if they worsen symptoms.
- Select lean meats, chicken, and fish. Other good choices are eggs, well-cooked fruits and vegetables, refined cereals, crackers, and breads.

When to call your doctor

Call your doctor if you:

- Have mucus, blood, or puss in your stool
- Have diarrhea that lasts longer than 2-3 days
- Have not urinated in 12 hours
- Have severe pain or abdominal cramping
- Are also vomiting
- Have a chronic illness such as diabetes
- Have a high fever (over 101° Fahrenheit)
- Are pregnant
- Experience rapid breathing, fever, or light-headedness
- Have traveled to a foreign country

Remember to eat and drink whatever you think will work best for you, wash your hands often, and eat and drink small portions, gradually increasing your diet as tolerated.

References

MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia. Diarrhea. Available at:
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003126.htm>. Accessed November 20, 2007.

Mayo Clinic. Diarrhea. Available at:
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/diarrhea/DS00292>. Accessed November 20, 2007.

Review Date 11/07
G-0513