

Diarrhea

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Introduction

Diarrhea is watery bowel movements. Treatments for cancer and some medical conditions may cause diarrhea. Diarrhea can give you stomach cramps, gas, or mucous discharge from the rectum. It causes food to pass quickly through the intestines. When this happens, water and nutrients are not well absorbed. If you have diarrhea twice a day or more or if it lasts for a long time, you may lose too much water. You may also lose weight.

This booklet describes a diet that is helpful in treating diarrhea. It is also good for frequent formed bowel movements. Eating a balanced diet is important for all patients getting treatment for cancer. Modify your diet if you develop symptoms of diarrhea or frequent stools. In addition, different treatments affect the bowels in different ways. You should speak with your doctor or nurse before you begin this diet. It may not be good for you. Your doctor or nurse may tell you to do something else.

Guidelines If You Develop Diarrhea or Frequent Stools

You must call your doctor or nurse if you have uncontrolled diarrhea after 24 hours.

- Begin taking the medicine your doctor prescribes. The names of two common ones are:
 - Imodium® [loperamide]
 - Lomotil®
- Drink at least eight to ten, 8-ounce glasses of liquids during the day. This will replace fluid lost by diarrhea. Drink a variety of liquids. Try apple or cranberry juice, Gatorade®, clear soups or broth, water and decaffeinated flat sodas. You may need to water down the juices with some amount of water before drinking. Do not drink alcohol or liquids with caffeine (e.g., coffee, tea, and some sodas). They can dehydrate you. Also avoid very hot liquids. Try not to drink only plain water. Soups, juices, and Gatorade® contain salts and sugars. This can help prevent weakness and lightheadedness. Try eating chicken soup or plain chicken broth. It has a high salt content and that will help you retain fluids.
- When you get diarrhea, select items from the “Recommended Foods” section. Avoid those items listed under “Foods to Avoid If You Develop Diarrhea.” You can add a diet of bananas (B), rice (R), applesauce (A), and toast (T). This is called the BRAT diet. It helps to bind your stools and replace nutrients. Take six or more small meals a day. Avoid large portions. If you still have diarrhea after 24 hours, call your doctor or nurse.
- Diarrhea may irritate the rectal area. Your doctor or nurse can give you the name of a moisturizer to rub on the area. You can apply this to the rectum after each diarrhea. You may also take sitz baths to help relieve some of the discomfort. Simply sit in a tub of lukewarm water several times a day.

Recommended Foods

Introduce the following foods to your diet to help control diarrhea.

Meat and Meat Substitutes

- White meat poultry (with the skin removed)
- Plain baked fish
- Eggs
- Tofu (packaged or sealed)
- Creamy peanut butter

Vegetables

- Well-cooked carrots, green beans, asparagus tips, and beets
- Baked potato without the skin (no fried potatoes)

Fruits and Juices

- Bananas
- Applesauce
- Cooked or canned fruits with the skin and seeds removed (e.g., apples, peaches, apricots, pears, fruit cocktail)
- Strained or jellied cranberry sauce without skins
- Diluted fruit juices and nectars without pulp (e.g., apple, grape, cranberry juice)

Bread, Cereals

- White and Italian bread and rolls, plain bagels, English muffins
- Saltines, graham crackers
- Cold cereals (cornflakes, Corn Chex[®], puffed rice, Rice Chex[®], Rice Krispies[®])
- Hot cereals (Cream of Rice[®], Farina[®], Cream of Wheat[®])
- White rice
- Spaghetti or noodles or other plain pasta without heavy sauce

Dairy

- Lactose-free milk (e.g., Lactaid[®], Dairy Ease[®])
- Lactose-free cottage cheese or lactose-free ice cream
- Plain yogurt
- Sorbet
- Lactose-free supplements (e.g., Ensure[®])

Foods to Avoid If You Develop Diarrhea

Do not eat these foods. They may:

- Irritate the intestines.
- Increase the bulk in your stool.
- Increase the movement of food through the intestines.

Avoid High-Fiber Foods

Fiber is the part of your food that does not get digested or absorbed. It forms the bulk that makes your stool. You need to restrict fiber to treat diarrhea. Foods to avoid include:

- Whole grain breads and cereals
- Bran
- Raw vegetables, including lettuce
- Cooked vegetables that cause gas (e.g., onion, garlic, cabbage, cauliflower, and broccoli)
- Fresh and dried fruits
- Juice with pulp (e.g., prune and orange)
- Beans, peas, and corn
- Nuts, seeds, and popcorn

Avoid High-Fat Foods

Fat can make diarrhea worse. Limit the amount of butter, margarine, oil, and salad dressing you use. Foods to avoid include:

- Fried foods
- Gravies
- Cream sauces
- High-fat luncheon meats
- Sausages and bacon

Avoid Foods and Liquids Containing Lactose

Lactose is a sugar in milk and milk products. When your intestines are irritated, they may not digest lactose completely. This can result in gas, cramping, and diarrhea. Foods to avoid include:

- Milk (whole and skim)
- Cream, sour cream, and creamy cheeses
- Processed cheese
- Ice cream, sherbet

It May Also Help If You Avoid

- Sugar-free and dietetic foods
- Products that contain sorbitol
- Sugar-free and regular chewing gum

Conclusion

Call your doctor or nurse if you still have loose bowel movements after:

- Changing your diet.
- Taking your medicine as directed.

They can decide how to treat you.

Review these guidelines and talk to your doctor or nurse. Some people will only need to limit certain foods. Others may require a very restricted diet. If you are on a special diet or have diabetes it may be hard for you to follow these guidelines. A dietitian or a diabetes educator at MSKCC can work with you. If you would like to meet with one of them, please tell your doctor or nurse.

We hope these guidelines are helpful to you. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your doctor or nurse.