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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Diarrhea

This information explains what diarrhea is and how to manage it.

## About Diarrhea

Diarrhea is a loose or watery bowel movement (stool), having more bowel movements than what's normal for you, or both. You may also have stomach cramps, gas, bleeding from your rectum (holding area for feces), or a fever (temperature above 100.4° F or 38° C). Having diarrhea can make you more likely to become dehydrated (not have enough fluid in your body).

Many people get diarrhea at some point during their cancer treatment. If you have diarrhea, talk with your doctor or nurse. They'll help you find the best way to manage it.

## Managing Diarrhea

Ask your doctor or nurse about the best way to treat your diarrhea. They may have recommendations for you that are different than the guidelines below.

### Medication to treat diarrhea

**Don't take any medication to treat diarrhea without speaking with your doctor or nurse first.** Depending on the reason you're having diarrhea, taking medications to stop it may be harmful.

If it's safe for you, your doctor may prescribe a medication or recommend an over-the-counter medication to treat your diarrhea.

### Foods and liquids to include in your diet

Try to eat 6 or more small meals each day while you have diarrhea. Don't have meals with large portions.

## Follow the BRATY diet

Some people find that following the BRATY diet helps to control their diarrhea. The BRATY diet is made up mostly of:

- Bananas (B)
- Rice (R)
- Applesauce (A)
- Toast (T)
- Yogurt (Y)

Be sure to also include some of the foods below so that you get enough nutrients.

## Meat and meat substitutes

- White-meat poultry such as chicken or turkey (with the skin removed)
- Plain baked fish
- Eggs
- Tofu

## Vegetables

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

## Fruits

- Bananas
- Applesauce
- Cooked or canned fruits with the skin and seeds removed (such as apples, peaches, apricots, pears, and fruit cocktail)

## Starches

- White and Italian bread and rolls, plain bagels, or English muffins
- Saltine crackers
- Graham crackers
- Cold cereals (such as cornflakes, Corn Chex<sup>®</sup>, puffed rice, Rice Chex<sup>®</sup>, and Rice Krispies<sup>®</sup>)
- Hot cereals (such as Cream of Rice<sup>®</sup>, Cream of Wheat<sup>®</sup>, and Farina<sup>®</sup>)
- White rice
- Plain pasta without heavy sauce

## Dairy

- Lactose-free milk (such as Lactaid<sup>®</sup> and Dairy Ease<sup>®</sup>)
- Lactose-free cottage cheese or ice cream
- Plain yogurt
- Sorbet
- Lactose-free supplements (such as Ensure<sup>®</sup>)

## Foods and liquids to avoid

### Foods and drinks high in fiber

Fiber is the part of your food that doesn't get digested by your body. It forms the bulk that makes up your bowel movements. Avoid high-fiber foods while you have diarrhea. These include:

- Whole-grain breads and cereals
- Bran
- Cooked or raw gas-producing vegetables (such as lettuce, onions, garlic, cabbage, cauliflower, and broccoli)
- Fresh and dried fruits
- Juice with pulp (such as prune and orange juice)
- Beans, peas, corn, and popcorn

## **Foods high in fat**

Eating high-fat foods can make your diarrhea worse. Limit your intake of:

- Butter
- Margarine
- Oil
- Salad dressing

Avoid the following high-fat foods:

- Fried foods
- Gravies
- Cream sauces
- High-fat deli meats
- Sausage and bacon

## **Foods and liquids with lactose**

Lactose is a sugar that's found in milk and milk products. When your bowels (intestines) are irritated, you may not be able to digest lactose completely. This can cause gas, stomach cramping, and diarrhea. Avoid the following foods and liquids:

- Milk (low-fat, whole, and skim)
- Cheese
- Cream and sour cream
- Ice cream and sherbet

If you're not able to avoid foods and liquids containing lactose, you can take a lactase supplement (such as LactAid®). Take the supplement before you eat or drink any milk or milk products.

## **Other foods to avoid**

- Products that contain sorbitol (a sugar alcohol found in some gum and sugar-free hard candies)

Some people will only need to limit certain foods while they have diarrhea. Others may need a very restricted diet. Your doctor will talk with you about any specific dietary recommendations.

If you're on a special diet or have diabetes, it may be hard for you to follow these guidelines. A dietitian or a diabetes educator at Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) can work with you. If you would like to meet with one of them, please tell your doctor or nurse.

## Preventing Dehydration

- Try to drink at least 8 to 10 (8-ounce) glasses of liquids each day. This will replace the liquid your body loses from having diarrhea.
- Drink small amounts of liquids often. This is more helpful than drinking large amounts of liquids at once.
- If you don't enjoy drinking water, try mixing in a small amount of fruit juice to add flavor.
- Drink clear soups, broth, and Gatorade®. These liquids contain salt and sugar, which can help keep you from becoming dehydrated and feeling weak.
- Don't drink alcohol or liquids with caffeine (such as coffee, tea, and some sodas). They can make you dehydrated.

## Care of the Skin Around Your Anus

Diarrhea may irritate the area around your anus. It can cause itching, pain, or a rash and make hemorrhoids (clumps of enlarged blood vessels in your rectum) worse. The following things can help prevent irritation.

- Use witch hazel pads to help relieve pain and swelling. Hold the pads against the skin around your anus. You can keep the pads in your refrigerator so they're cool, or you can use them at room temperature.
- Use a pain relief cream that doesn't contain steroids, such as a hemorrhoid cream with pramoxine (for example, Preparation H® Maximum Strength Pain Relief Cream). Apply the cream to the skin around your anus up to 4 times daily. Apply the cream either before or after having a bowel movement, whichever is more helpful.
- Apply vitamin A&D cream (such as A+D® ointment) or zinc oxide cream

(such as Desitin® cream) around your anus after each bowel movement. Apply it right after you dry the area.

- Take sitz baths after every bowel movement or as needed.
- If you're not able to use a sitz bath, wipe with unscented baby wipes after every bowel movement. Dry the area with a soft towel.
- Wear loose undergarments and pants. Don't wear thongs.
- Avoid trauma to the area around your anus (such as riding a bicycle, motorcycle, or horse).
- Don't use scented body lotion on the skin around your anus.

You can buy the items in the list above at your local pharmacy without a prescription.

## Call Your Doctor or Nurse if You Have:

- Uncontrolled diarrhea
- Diarrhea with any bleeding
- A temperature above 100.4° F (38° C)
- Pain or swelling in your abdomen (belly)

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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