

# Managing Diarrhea

## What is Diarrhea?

Diarrhea is when you have watery, loose bowel movements that occur more than three times per day. You may also have stomach cramps, bloating and pain. Diarrhea is a common problem. After a few days, it usually goes away on its own. Most of the time, it is only treated by replacing lost fluids and salts. However longer lasting or chronic diarrhea which lasts for more than three days may be a part of another problem. In this case, see your doctor so you can find out what may be the cause of your diarrhea.

## What are some causes of Diarrhea?

Diarrhea may be caused by:

- | Bacteria from contaminated food or water
- | Viruses such as the Norwalk virus
- | Food intolerances such as lactose intolerance
- | Some medicines, such as antibiotics

Travelers may get diarrhea too. Be careful if you are on a camping trip or on vacation in a country outside of North America. Drinking contaminated tap water or eating foods that were not properly cooked or cleaned may cause traveler's diarrhea.

Sometimes, diarrhea may be caused by a disease, such as Crohn's, celiac or colitis. In these cases, diarrhea may be an on-going symptom that you should discuss with your doctor.

## Who Can Get Diarrhea?

Anyone can get diarrhea at any time. It can be unsafe in infants and older adults because they get dehydrated more quickly. Being dehydrated means that the body does not have enough fluid or salts to work properly. Severe dehydration can be dangerous if it is not treated quickly.



## Steps you can take

### 1. Prevent Dehydration

- | Drink eight to ten cups (2 L - 2.5 L) of fluid each day to make up for fluid losses. Choose water, weak tea, broth, diluted juice or sports drinks that contain salts such as sodium and potassium.
- | Avoid sugary drinks such as soda pop, fruit drinks and chocolate milk, as they may make diarrhea worse.
- | You may need to drink more fluids if you notice these signs of dehydration:
  - | Being thirsty.
  - | Urinating less than usual.
  - | Having dark-coloured urine.
  - | Feeling very tired.
  - | Feeling dizzy.

### 2. Avoid Certain Foods

- | Some foods and drinks may make diarrhea worse since they can cause more bloating, gas, or loose bowel movements. While you have diarrhea, avoid:
  - | Caffeine found in coffee, tea, cola, and energy drinks.
  - | High amounts of sugar found in cakes, cookies and candy.
  - | High amounts of fruit sugar found in apple juice, honey, dates, figs and prunes.
  - | Sugar alcohols such as sorbitol and mannitol found in sugar-free chocolate, gum and mints.
  - | Fried or fatty foods such as oil, butter, french fries, doughnuts, or other fried foods.
  - | High fat dairy products like whole milk, cheese and cream.

- High fibre foods like high fibre cereals, beans, lentils, berries, peas and broccoli.

Some people with diarrhea also avoid or limit foods that contain lactose such as milk and other dairy products. Currently there is not enough evidence to support this restriction.

### 3. Choose Foods That Are Easier To Tolerate

- Once the stomach cramps and diarrhea settles down, it is common practice to eat small amounts of these bland foods:
  - Low fibre grain products such as white rice, noodles, white bread or bagels, plain crackers or cream of wheat.
  - Vegetables and fruit such as apple sauce, bananas, boiled peeled potatoes, cooked carrots or squash.
  - Protein foods such as cooked eggs, skinless chicken, lean fish or yogurt.

### 4. Try probiotics

- Probiotics, which are "healthy bacteria", may help reduce the number of loose bowel movements you produce, and may help diarrhea stop more quickly.
- Probiotics are found in pills and yogurts.
- Look for a yogurt that is labeled "probiotic" or "live active cultures". Different brands contain different amounts of probiotics. Choose one that contains a higher amount. This information is not always available on the label so you may need to check with the company or access the company website.
- For the best effect, make sure you buy probiotic pills with at least one to 10 billion colony forming units (cfu) of viable bacteria.
- Probiotics can help treat diarrhea that is caused by taking antibiotics, but may not work well for treating traveler's diarrhea.

### 5. Talk to your doctor before taking medicine

- In some cases your doctor may prescribe medicine such as antibiotics. This will depend on the cause of your diarrhea.

- | Speak with our doctor before taking any over-the-counter diarrhea medications. This is especially the case if your diarrhea is caused by parasites or if you are being treated for cancer, HIV, Crohn's disease or another chronic condition.

### Prevent Traveler's Diarrhea Before it Starts

If you are visiting a country outside of North America, take these precautions to prevent traveler's diarrhea:

- | Drink only bottled water.
- | Do not drink water from the tap.
- | Add ice cubes made only from bottled water.
- | Eat raw vegetables and fruit that you peel yourself.
- | Consume only well cooked meat, fish and shellfish.
- | Buy unopened packaged food from street vendors.



### Notes

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