

# What to Do for Diarrhea

Diarrhea is passing loose or watery stools many times a day with or without discomfort. It happens when water in the bowel (colon or intestine) isn't being absorbed back into the body. Diarrhea can lead to weight loss, fluid loss, belly pain, skin irritation, and weakness.



## Diarrhea can be caused by:

- Chemotherapy, targeted therapy, or immunotherapy
- Radiation therapy to the abdomen (belly)
- Infection
- Some medicines
- Some kinds of cancer
- Surgery that takes out part of the bowels
- Stress
- Eating foods that may not agree with you
- Blockage in part of the bowel that only lets liquid stool by



## What you can do if you have diarrhea

Ask your cancer care team if you are likely to have diarrhea for any reason. If you have diarrhea, some of these tips might be helpful to you.

### Try eating these things.

- Clear liquids, such as water, weak tea, apple juice, clear broth, and clear gelatin
- Salty foods, such as broths, soups, sports drinks, crackers, and pretzels
- Foods high in potassium, such as fruit juices and nectars, sports drinks, potatoes with the skin, and bananas
- Small meals that are easy to digest, like rice, noodles, skinless turkey and chicken, white toast, mashed potatoes, and well-cooked eggs

### Do not eat, drink, or use these things.

- Foods that are very hot or spicy
- High-fiber foods, like nuts, seeds, whole grains, beans and peas, dried fruits, and raw fruits and vegetables
- High-fat foods, such as fried and greasy foods
- Drinks with caffeine or alcohol
- Sugar-free chewing gum and candies made with sugar alcohol (i.e., sorbitol, mannitol, or xylitol)
- Pastries, candies, rich desserts, and jellies
- Milk or milk products. Yogurt and buttermilk are usually OK.
- Tobacco



## What you can do to feel better

- Sip liquids all day to prevent dehydration. Try Popsicles, gelatin, and ice chips. Ask your cancer care team what a safe amount of liquids is for you.
- Eat small meals and snacks often during the day.
- Try to drink at least 1 cup of liquid after each loose bowel movement.
- Clean your bottom with a mild soap after each bowel movement, rinse well with warm water, and pat dry. Or, use unscented baby wipes to clean yourself.
- Apply a water-repellent ointment, such as vitamin A&D ointment or petroleum jelly, to your bottom.
- Sit in a tub of warm water or a sitz bath.



## Other tips

- Keep a record of your bowel movements to report to your cancer care team.
- Take medicine for diarrhea as directed by your cancer care team.
- Check with your cancer care team before using any over-the-counter diarrhea medicine.
- If your diarrhea gets bad (meaning that you have 7 or 8 loose stools in 24 hours), tell your cancer care team right away.
- Once the diarrhea has stopped, start small regular meals. Slowly start eating foods that contain fiber.



## Talk to your cancer care team if:

- You have loose bowel movements many times a day unless your cancer care team told you to expect it.
- You are dizzy or feel like you may pass out.
- The diarrhea doesn't get better or gets worse while you are taking the medicine your cancer care team directed you to.
- You have blood in your stool or around your anus.
- You don't urinate (pee) for 12 or more hours.
- You can't drink liquids for 24 hours or more.
- You have new belly pain, cramps, or a swollen belly.
- You have a fever. Your cancer care team will let you know what temperature a fever is.
- You've been constipated for several days and then start to pass small amounts of liquid stool.

For cancer information and answers, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

