

# Managing Diarrhea and Preventing Dehydration

Diarrhea is unusually frequent and/or liquid bowel movements. It may be caused by your cancer treatments, surgery on the stomach or intestines, infection, or by emotional stress.

Long-term diarrhea may lead to dehydration (lack of water in the body), weight loss, and/or electrolyte imbalances such as low levels of salt and potassium. (Your body needs salt and potassium to function properly.)

## Foods That May Help

- Yogurt, cottage cheese
- Rice, noodles, or potatoes
- Farina or cream of wheat cereal
- Eggs (whites should be solid, avoid frying)
- Smooth peanut butter
- White bread
- Canned, peeled fruits and well-cooked vegetables
- Chicken or turkey without skin, lean beef, and broiled or baked fish

## Foods to Avoid

- Greasy, fatty, and fried foods
- Raw vegetables
- Skins, seeds, and stringy fibers of unpeeled fruits
- High fiber vegetables: broccoli, corn, dried beans, cabbage, peas, and cauliflower – avoid these even if they are cooked
- Foods high in sugar and/or high in fat

## Helpful Hints

- Avoid very hot or very cold foods and drinks –they should be room temperature.
- Limit or avoid products that contain caffeine:
  - Many sodas: regular and diet colas, Dr. Pepper®, Sunkist Orange, Mountain Dew, and A&W cream soda
  - Energy drinks such as Red Bull®
  - Coffees and teas

- Chocolate
- Over-the-counter medications: NoDoz, Vivarin, Excedrin, Bayer Select or Midol Menstrual Maximum Strength, Anacin, Goody's, and Vanquish
- Prescription medications: Ercaf, Ergo-Caff, Gotamine, Wigraine, Carvon, Fiorinal, Norgestic, Norphadrin, and Triaminicin w/ codeine
- Be careful with milk/dairy products as the lactose in them can make diarrhea worse.
- Sip your liquids.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco products.

## **The BRAT Diet**

The BRAT diet was promoted as a treatment of choice for diarrhea. While it can be useful for a day or two, staying on the diet for too long may cause a zinc deficiency. Zinc plays a key role in your immune system, growth, and skin development. You can meet your body's zinc requirements by adding chicken, meat, fish, or dairy products back into your diet as soon as possible.

**B**...Bananas

**R**...Rice

**A**...Applesauce

**T**...Toast

## **Sudden, Short-term Attacks**

If you get a sudden, acute attack of diarrhea, do not have anything except clear liquids\* for 12-24 hours. This will give your intestines time to rest and replace the fluids you lost. If you have this problem, let your doctor or nurse know as soon as possible.

\*See the list of clear liquids in the dehydration section

## **Important!**

Neither the BRAT diet nor a clear liquid diet meets your body's basic needs for calories or protein. Both diets are short-term tools and should not be used for more than 1-2 days without your doctor's knowledge.

If your diarrhea lasts longer than 24 hours, make sure your doctor is aware of your symptoms. Make sure she/he has approved any treatments, diets, or other measures that you are using to manage the problem.

## Dehydration

Dehydration is an excessive loss of water from your body, which occurs when your body loses more fluids than you take in. Dehydration may result from excessive or long term vomiting or diarrhea, a low fluid intake, bleeding, infection or illness, or as a side effect of treatment.

Dehydration from diarrhea can result in kidney failure, neurological symptoms, arthritis, and skin problems. It may cause confusion and disorientation. Severe dehydration leads to changes in the body's chemistry, (electrolyte imbalances), which may become life-threatening. People with severe diarrhea (or severe vomiting) should not be left alone to care for themselves.

Early signs of dehydration may be hard to notice. If you have any of these signs or symptoms, call your doctor.

- Increased thirst
- Dry mucus membranes (inside of your mouth, nose)
- Thick mucus or a lack of saliva
- Dry skin or skin that keeps its tent shape after you pinch it/pull it up and then let go
- Weakness or lightheadedness (particularly if it gets worse when you stand up)
- Dark urine or little or no urine output

## Tips to Prevent Dehydration

- Take medications for nausea and vomiting as prescribed by your doctor. If you are running low, ask for a refill.
- Take at least a teaspoonful of clear liquids every minute to prevent dehydration.

## Clear Liquid Diet

Liquids that you can see through at room temperature (about 72°-78°) are considered clear liquids.

**Avoid all red and purple liquids.**

### Beverages

- Soft drinks (orange, ginger ale, cola, lemon/lime, etc.)
- Gatorade® or Kool-Aid®
- Strained fruit juice without pulp (apple or lemonade)
- Water, flavored waters, tea or coffee (you can add sugar, but NO milk or creamers)

### Soups

- Chicken, beef, vegetable broth or bouillon – no added meats, noodles, or vegetables

### Desserts

- Hard candy
- Jell-O® (no fruit toppings or whipped cream)
- Popsicles or lemon ice (no sherbets, sorbets, or fruit bars)

## **Tips to Prevent Electrolyte Imbalance**

- Eat plenty of foods and liquids that contain sodium and potassium because these minerals are often lost during diarrhea.
- Sports drinks, such as Gatorade, contain both sodium and potassium and have easily absorbable forms of carbohydrates.
- High sodium liquids include bouillon and fat-free broth.
- Foods high in potassium that do not cause diarrhea include bananas, peach or apricot nectars, and boiled or mashed potatoes.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has provided this easy recipe for a homemade version of a sports drink. After preparation, drink it in small, frequent sips.

Mix:

- 3/4 teaspoon table salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 cup orange juice
- 1 quart or liter of water

## **When to Call Your Doctor**

Be sure to call your doctor if you notice any of the following:

- vomiting
- fever over 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, shaking, and/or chills
- bloody bowel movements
- severe abdominal pain
- signs of dehydration (listed above)



# Constipation

## Key Points

- Causes: Some chemo and opioid medications, low fiber diet, lack of exercise, hormone or electrolyte imbalance, not drinking enough water, and overusing laxatives.
- Eating fiber rich foods, staying hydrated, and increasing physical activity may help.
- There are many types of laxatives. Talk to your doctor about what's best for you.

Constipation is hard, dry stool that is hard to pass and/or going to the bathroom less often than normal (for you). Constipation occurs when the colon (bowel) takes too much water out of the stool. This happens when stool moves through the colon too slowly or when the colon absorbs water faster than normal. About half of all people with cancer have constipation. Common causes include:

- Cancer or cancer treatment that creates blocks the intestine, puts pressure on the nerves controlling the colon; or damages the cells lining the digestive tract.
- Medications for nausea or seizures, pain (opioids), vinca alkaloid chemo drugs such as vincristine/Oncovin®, vinblastine/Velbe®, and vinorelbine/Navelbine®.
- Not enough physical activity, fiber in the diet, water (dehydration), or food.
- Heavy or long term use of laxatives.
- Hormonal imbalances that change your metabolism such as low thyroid hormone levels.
- Electrolyte imbalances such as high levels of iron, calcium, or potassium.
- Depression.

## Symptoms

- Feeling full/bloated, cramps, belly pain, gas, loss of appetite, no bowel movements for 2+ days, straining to go, feeling pressure in your rectum, nausea, or anal leaking\* that looks like diarrhea.  
\* Stool that moves around a large amount of stool stuck in colon/rectum (impaction).

## Prevention – The Better Option

- ✓ **Eat more fiber.** Fiber draws water into the stool and softens it. Add fiber to your diet *slowly* to avoid gas and bloating – 5 grams a day if OK with your doctor.
- ✓ **Eat and cook with foods that are natural laxatives** such as seeds, raisins, prunes, prune juice, bran, papaya, and fibrous vegetables (sweet potatoes, pumpkin, spinach, kale).
- ✓ **Have a prevention plan.** If taking opioid medication, ask about a bowel routine to prevent constipation. Opioids slow down the colon and cause constipation.
- ✓ **Drink 2-3 quarts (liters) per day, particularly water** to stay hydrated and keep the fiber moving through your colon. Hot drinks (cocoa, tea, hot water with lemon) can help stimulate the colon. Try to have a hot beverage and a high fiber food at breakfast.

- ✓ **Increase physical activity.** Even a short walk can help get your intestines moving. Always check with your doctor before starting any new activity.



## Foods to Help with Constipation

Breads and grains	Fruits and vegetables	Snacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bran or whole-grain cereals</li> <li>• Brown or wild rice</li> <li>• Cooked, dried peas and beans (such as pinto, black, or kidney beans)</li> <li>• Whole wheat bread or pasta</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dried fruit, such as apricots, dates, prunes, and raisins</li> <li>• Fresh fruit, such as apples, blueberries, and grapes</li> <li>• Raw or cooked vegetables such as broccoli, corn, peas, green beans, and spinach</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Granola</li> <li>• Nuts</li> <li>• Popcorn</li> <li>• Seeds, such as sunflower</li> </ul> 

## Over-the-Counter Laxatives

- **Check with your healthcare team before using any of these products.**
- Do not use laxatives for more than 1 week without your doctor's approval.
- Laxatives can interfere with other medicines. Take other medicines 2 hours before or after a laxative. If you are not sure if your medicines might interact, ask your pharmacist.

Laxative Type	How it Works	Products
Stool softeners	Increases water & fat in the colon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• docusate/Colace®</li> </ul>
Stimulants	Increases the colon's contractions and moves stool through colon faster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bisacodyl/Correctol®, Dulcolax®</li> <li>• sennosides/Senokot®, Ex-Lax®</li> </ul>
Bulk forming (fiber supplements)	Moves through the colon quickly, taking stool with it. <b>Only works if you drink a lot of water!</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• psyllium/Metamucil®</li> <li>• methylcellulose/Citrucel®</li> <li>• polycarbophil/FiberCon®</li> </ul>
Osmotic preparations	Pulls water into the colon. Your doctor may combine an osmotic laxative with a stimulant laxative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• magnesium hydroxide/Milk of Magnesia®</li> <li>• polyethylene glycol/Miralax®</li> <li>• sorbitol, magnesium citrate, lactulose, and glycerin suppositories</li> </ul>
Lubricants	Keeps water in the colon (softens) & makes stools oily (easier to pass)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fleet® Mineral Oil Enema, mineral oil</li> </ul>