

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

What 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
- Very hot or very cold foods and drinks –they should be room temperature
- Alcohol and tobacco

Helpful tips

- Limit or avoid foods and products that contain caffeine:
 - Many sodas including regular and diet colas, Dr. Pepper®, Sunkist Orange, Mountain Dew, and A&W cream soda/pop; energy drinks such as Red Bull®; coffees, and teas. Chocolate.
 - Prescription (Ercaf®, Gotamine®, Wigraine®, Fiorinal®, Norgesic®, and Triaminicin w/ codeine) and over-the-counter medications (NoDoz, Vivarin, Excedrin, Bayer Select or Midol Menstrual Maximum Strength, Anacin, Goody's, and Vanquish)
- Be careful with milk/dairy products as the lactose (sugar) in them can make diarrhea worse.
- Sip your liquids.

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

Clear liquids for sudden, short-term attacks

If you get a sudden, acute attack of diarrhea, do not have anything except clear liquids (see page 3) 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.

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 they have 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. Call your doctor if you have:

- 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. Ask for a refill when you are running low - don't wait until your medication is all gone.
- 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°F) are considered clear liquids. **Avoid all red and purple liquids.**

- **Beverages:** Soft drinks (orange, ginger ale, cola, lemon/lime, etc.), Gatorade®, Kool-Aid®, strained fruit juice without pulp (apple or lemonade), water, flavored waters, tea or coffee (adding a little sugar is OK, but DO NOT add milk or creamer)
- **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 of **100.4°F (38°C)** or higher, shaking, and/or chills
- bloody bowel movements
- severe abdominal pain
- signs of dehydration (listed above)