

Education

Acute Diarrhea

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea means frequent loose bowel movements. Diarrhea is acute when it starts suddenly and clears up within a few days. Most people have diarrhea once in a while, usually after eating or drinking contaminated food or liquid or when they have stomach flu.

Diarrhea that doesn't go away after a few days or keeps coming back is called chronic. It may be a sign of other medical problems.

Diarrhea can be serious in very young children and older adults because it can cause dehydration (a loss of too much fluid from the body).

How does it occur?

Acute diarrhea may be caused by:

- infection with bacteria, viruses, or parasites, such as food poisoning or stomach flu
- antibiotic medicine
- food sensitivities.

What are the symptoms?

With the frequent loose bowel movements, you may also have:

- abdominal pain and cramping
- fever.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will review your symptoms and examine you. Your provider will make sure that you are not getting dehydrated and that you do not have appendicitis.

A sample of your blood or urine may be tested. You may need to give 1 or more samples of bowel movement (stool samples) for lab tests.

How is it treated?

You need to replace the fluids and body chemicals that are lost when you have diarrhea. Your health care provider will probably advise you to drink plenty of clear fluids. Sports drinks or other oral rehydration solutions (OES) can help you replace lost salts as well as fluid. You can make a rehydration solution with packets from the drugstore or by mixing:

- 1 quart or liter of clean water (boil the water 5 minutes if you are not sure it is safe to drink)
- 2 tablespoons of sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon of baking soda.

Drinking other nonalcoholic drinks made with clean water will also help prevent dehydration, but you may not get all the salts you need.

Your provider may prescribe an antibiotic if your diarrhea is caused by bacteria. If an antibiotic taken for another illness is

causing the diarrhea, your provider may ask you to stop taking that antibiotic.

How long will the effects last?

The symptoms of acute diarrhea usually last less than 3 days. Sometimes the diarrhea is gone after just a few hours, but sometimes it lasts as long as 2 weeks.

How can I take care of myself?

If your temperature is over 100°F (38°C), rest as much as you can. After your temperature falls below 100°F, moderate activity is OK. Take acetaminophen to control your fever. Keep a daily record of your temperature.

For cramps and abdominal pain, it may help to put a hot water bottle or electric heating pad (set on low) on your abdomen.

You may want to let your bowel rest for a few hours by drinking only clear liquids such as water, weak tea, bouillon, apple juice, or sports drinks or other oral rehydrating solutions. You may also drink soft drinks without caffeine (such as 7 UP) after letting them lose some of their carbonation (go flat). Make sure you drink often so you do not become dehydrated. Becoming dehydrated can be very dangerous, especially for children, older adults, and some people who have other medical problems. Suck on ice chips or Popsicles if you feel too nauseated to drink fluids.

It is OK to keep eating as long as it does not seem to worsen the diarrhea or stomach cramps. Foods that are easiest to digest are soft starchy foods, such as bananas, cooked cereal, rice, plain noodles, gelatin, eggs, toast or bread with jelly, and applesauce. Avoid milk products and caffeine for a few days. Return to your normal diet after 2 or 3 days, but for several days avoid fresh fruit (other than bananas), alcohol, greasy or fatty foods such as cheeseburgers or bacon, highly seasoned or spicy foods, and most fresh vegetables. Cooked carrots, potatoes, and squash are fine. If eating seems to worsen the diarrhea, let your bowel rest for a few hours by drinking just clear liquids.

Be cautious about taking nonprescription antidiarrheal medicines such as loperamide (Kaopectate or Imodium) or the prescription medicine Lomotil. These medicines can actually make the illness more severe, especially if the diarrhea is bloody. If you take one of these medicines, make sure you use only the dose recommended on the package. If you have chronic health problems, always check with your health care provider before you use any medicine for diarrhea.

Call your health care provider if:

- The diarrhea lasts longer than 3 days.
- You have cramps or abdominal pain that lasts more than a few days, becomes intense, or affects only one area of your abdomen.
- You are lightheaded.
- You have blood or mucus in your bowel movements.
- You have a fever of 102°F (39°C) or higher.

What can I do to help prevent acute diarrhea?

To prevent passing your infection to others:

- Avoid unnecessary contact until your symptoms are gone.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and very warm water after you use the restroom.
- Do not prepare food for other people. If you must prepare or serve food, wash your hands thoroughly before you cook or serve food and wear disposable plastic server gloves.
- Do not work as a food handler or server in restaurants, dining halls, or grocery stores until your diarrhea is completely gone.

Some things you can do to help prevent getting diarrhea are:

- Always wash your hands after you use the restroom and before you eat.
- Make sure the dairy products you eat and drink have been pasteurized.
- Serve food right after it has been cooked or reheated. Refrigerate food promptly after meals.

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