

ASCO answers

Diarrhea

What is diarrhea?

With diarrhea, you experience frequent, loose, or watery bowel movements, also called stools. Doctors use grades established by the National Cancer Institute to describe the severity of diarrhea. Grade 1 is an increase of less than 4 stools a day. Grade 2 is an increase of 4 to 6 stools a day. Grade 3 includes an increase of 7 or more stools a day, an inability to control bowel movements, and a reduced ability to care for your daily needs. Treating grade 3 diarrhea usually requires a hospital stay. Grade 4 diarrhea is a life-threatening condition that requires immediate intensive care.



What causes diarrhea?

Causes of diarrhea include some types of cancer, including cancer that affects the pancreas; chemotherapy; radiation therapy to the pelvis; the removal of a portion of the bowel; and graft-versus-host disease, which is a side effect of bone marrow transplantation. Conditions unrelated to cancer that may cause diarrhea include irritable or inflammatory bowel disease, viral infection, the inability to digest certain foods, or infection with *Clostridium difficile*, a diarrhea-causing bacteria. In addition, some people experience diarrhea while taking antibiotics. Your health care team may perform medical tests to discover the cause(s) in your case.

What are the risks of diarrhea?

Although uncomfortable, mild diarrhea usually does not cause serious problems. However, ongoing or severe diarrhea can cause dehydration. Dehydration is a condition that happens when the body loses too much water. It may lead to other health complications.

What are the prevention and treatment options for diarrhea?

Talk with your doctor because the best prevention and treatment options depend on your symptoms and the cause of diarrhea.

Ask your doctor about medications to prevent diarrhea, including over-the-counter and prescription medications. These are often used to treat diarrhea caused by chemotherapy. Researchers are studying drugs for preventing diarrhea caused by radiation therapy to the pelvic area.

For severe diarrhea from chemotherapy, ask your doctor about changing the schedule or dose of the chemotherapy. For mild diarrhea, consider these options to help manage it:

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, dairy, fat, fiber, orange juice, prune juice, and spicy foods.
- Avoid medicines such as laxatives and stool softeners.
- Eat small, frequent meals. Choose foods that are easy to digest, such as bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast. If chemotherapy caused the diarrhea, your doctor may recommend a low-residue diet. This is a plan to eat low-fiber foods.
- Drink water and other clear liquids to prevent dehydration. People with severe dehydration may need to receive intravenous fluid. This means that a health care provider delivers fluid to the body through a vein.
- Track when and how often diarrhea occurs. Having this information can help your health care team make treatment decisions. A tracker and food diary can be found on the other side of this fact sheet.

Documenting diarrhea

YOUR DIARRHEA TRACKER

Date: _____

Time	Description/Severity	Potential Cause	Treatment

FOOD DIARY

Time	Food or Beverage	Amount	Notes

Doctor's name: _____ Email address: _____ Phone number: _____

For more information on cancer-related diarrhea, visit www.cancer.net/diarrhea or download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

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