

Diarrhea

Diarrhea is loose or watery stools that occur more often than usual. For patients with cancer, diarrhea can be caused by:

- Certain types of cancer
- Treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery, and bone marrow or stem cell transplant
- Infection
- Certain medications
- Emotional upset

Diarrhea can be worse if you are undergoing more than one cancer treatment at the same time, such as radiation therapy with chemotherapy. Uncontrolled diarrhea can lead to weakness, poor appetite, dehydration, and weight loss.

Reasons to Call Your Doctor

Call your doctor if:

- Your diarrhea won't stop.
- You have more than six watery stools in a 24-hour period.
- Your stools have a strange odor or color.

Fluid and Food Choices for Managing Diarrhea

- Drink plenty of mild, clear liquids during the day. Room-temperature liquids are easier on your stomach than hot or cold ones.
- To replace fluids lost with diarrhea, drink at least 1 cup (8 ounces) of liquid after each loose bowel movement.
- Eat several small meals and snacks throughout the day, rather than eating two or three larger meals.
- Review the chart at the end of this handout to learn foods to avoid or choose when you have diarrhea.
- Drink and eat small portions of foods that provide sodium and potassium (two minerals that your body loses when you have diarrhea). Choices include broths, soups, fruit juices, sport drinks, crackers, pretzels, potatoes without skin, and ripe bananas.
- Eat foods high in pectin, such as applesauce and bananas, to firm up your bowel movements.
- Avoid greasy, fried, spicy, and very sweet foods.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- When you have diarrhea for more than a day or so, limit milk and dairy foods to no more than 2 cups a day. Prolonged diarrhea can cause temporary lactose intolerance (an inability to digest lactose, the natural sugar in milk). If you become lactose intolerant, milk and dairy foods can cause diarrhea, gas, and bloating.
- Limit drinks and foods that cause gas, including carbonated drinks, vegetables in the cabbage family, and dried beans and peas.
- If you want a carbonated drink, stir it or pour it into a glass to lessen the bubbles.

- Avoid foods, chewing gum, and candies made with sorbitol, xylitol, or mannitol. These types of sugar alcohols can cause diarrhea, gas, and bloating.
- When you have diarrhea, limit high-fiber foods (such as bran, popcorn, whole grains, dried beans, cabbage, broccoli, and brussels sprouts) until the diarrhea ends. When diarrhea has stopped, slowly add foods with fiber back into your diet.

Quick Tip

Lie down for 30 minutes after a meal to help slow down digestion.

Medications and Supplements

- Never take an over-the-counter medication for diarrhea without first talking to your doctor.
- Avoid magnesium and vitamin C supplements because they can cause diarrhea.
- Ask your doctor, nurse, or registered dietitian (RD) whether it is appropriate for you to:
 - Take a vitamin and mineral supplement.
 - Eat foods that contain probiotics (such as yogurt with live active cultures) or take a probiotic supplement.
 - Use a bulking agent containing psyllium fiber.

Foods Choices for People with Diarrhea

Type of Food	Recommended Foods	Not Recommended Foods
High-protein foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baked or broiled beef, pork, chicken, liver, turkey, veal, or fish • Eggs • Milk, cheese, and yogurt (Avoid or limit milk and cheese if you have lactose intolerance.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dried peas and beans (such as lentils, kidney beans, white beans) • Nuts and seeds • Chunky peanut butter • Meats that are spicy, fatty or have gristle
Grain foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breads, muffins, and rolls made from refined white flour • Pasta made with refined flour • Converted or instant rice • Refined cereals such as farina, cream of wheat, cream of rice, and cornflakes • Oatmeal • Pancakes and waffles • Cornbread • Pretzels • Graham crackers • Saltines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole grain breads such as multi-grain bread with nuts and seeds • Whole grain pasta • Brown rice and cooked other whole grains • Whole grain cereals • Bran • High-fiber instant cereals • Granola • Popcorn • Baked goods and snack foods made with whole grains, dried fruits, nuts, seeds, and other high-fiber ingredients
Fruits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canned or cooked fruit • Fruit juices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh, unpeeled fruit • Dried fruit

Continues

Foods Choices for People with Diarrhea *(continued)*

Type of Food	Recommended Foods	Not Recommended Foods
Vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooked asparagus tips, beets, carrots, peeled zucchini, mushrooms, celery, green beans, acorn squash • Baked potato without skin • Tomato paste, tomato puree, tomato sauce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All other cooked vegetables; raw vegetables
Other foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mild clear liquids • Broths and soups • Sport drinks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foods made with sugar alcohols (sorbitol, xylitol, or mannitol) • Carbonated drinks • Foods and drinks with caffeine • Alcohol • Spicy, fried, greasy, and very sweet foods