



ROGEL CANCER CENTER
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HEALTH

Diarrhea in People with Cancer

Diarrhea is having loose or watery stools (bowel movements) 3 or more times a day. It happens when the water in your intestine is not being absorbed back into the body. Sometimes, diarrhea can be caused by an overflow of intestinal liquids around stool (poop) that is stuck in the intestine (called **impaction**).

There are many causes for diarrhea in people with cancer, including:

- Infections
- Surgery
- Anxiety
- Side effects of chemotherapy, radiation therapy to the abdomen (stomach), or medications
 - Diarrhea caused by chemotherapy or radiation therapy may last for up to 3 weeks after treatment ends.
- Supplemental feedings that contain large amounts of vitamins, minerals, sugar, and electrolytes
- Tumor growth

What can a person with cancer do to prevent or treat diarrhea?

- Try going on a clear liquid diet (only eating and drinking things like water, weak tea, apple juice, peach nectar, clear broth, popsicles, or plain gelatin) as soon as diarrhea starts, or when you feel that it's going to start. Avoid acidic drinks, such as tomato juice, citrus juices, and fizzy soft drinks.
- Eat small meals often (instead of waiting and eating large meals).
- Try eating small amounts of low-fiber foods.
 - This may include foods in the BRAT diet - bananas, rice, applesauce, dry white toast - as well as yogurt, mashed

potatoes, or low-fat cottage cheese.

- Eat foods high in potassium (like bananas, potatoes, or apricots) and sodium (like soups, broths, sports drinks, or pretzels). Sodium and potassium are important minerals that your body often loses through diarrhea.
- If your diarrhea lasts longer than 2 days, start a liquid diet and add low-fiber foods (as tolerated).
- Keep track of how many bowel movements you have and how often you have them. If you have 3 or more loose bowel movements per day, contact the clinic for recommendations.
- Clean your anal (butt) area with mild soap after each bowel movement. Rinse well with warm water and pat dry.
 - You can also do sitz baths, where you fill a bathtub or plastic tub with 3-4 inches of warm water and soak your anal area for 15-20 minutes. You may do this as often as necessary for pain relief.
- Check your anal area for red, scaly, or broken skin. If you notice these issues, try doing sitz baths.
- Put a water-repellent ointment, such as A+D® ointment, on the anal area.
- Take medication for diarrhea (like loperamide, or Imodium®) or skin irritation as recommended by your doctor. If your diarrhea does not improve after taking medication, contact your doctor.

Do not eat these foods, as they may upset your digestive tract:

- Whole grain breads, cereals, or bran
- Fried or greasy food
- Nuts
- Raw fruits or vegetables
- Rich pastries, candy, or jellies
- Strong spices or herbs

- Caffeinated, alcoholic, or carbonated drinks
- Milk or milk products
- Very hot or very cold foods

What can caregivers do to help prevent or treat diarrhea in people with cancer?

- Make sure the patient drinks about 3 quarts (3/4 of a gallon) of fluids each day.
- Keep a record of their bowel movements to help you decide when you might need to call the doctor.
- Check with the doctor before giving them any over-the-counter diarrhea medication. Many diarrhea medications contain compounds like aspirin, which can worsen bleeding problems.

When should I call the doctor?

Call the doctor if you, or the person with cancer you take care of, has any of the following symptoms:

- 6 or more loose bowel movements per day for more than 2 days
- Blood in or around the anal area, or blood in the stool (poop)
- Weight loss of 5 pounds or more after diarrhea starts
- New abdominal (stomach) cramps or pain that lasts 2 or more days
- Not being able to urinate (pee) for 12 or more hours, or dark-colored urine
- Not being able to drink liquids for more than 2 days
- Fever of 100.4° F or higher
- Suddenly puffy or bloated stomach
- Constipation (not being able to have a bowel movement, or having hard bowel movements) for several days, with a small amount of diarrhea or oozing of poop or stool

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by University of Michigan (U-M) Health for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by U-M Health and for which U-M Health does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition, or your treatment plan.

Author: Margie Fulkert, RN
Reviewer: Emily Plave, RN
Edited by: Brittany Batell, MPH MSW
Document #1678

Information in this handout was sourced from the “Managing Diarrhea - Patient” handout from City of Hope, the American Cancer Society, the National Cancer Institute, and the NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology

Patient Education by [U-M Health](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last revised 04/2024