

Acute Diarrhea

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea means frequent loose bowel movements. If it starts all of a sudden and doesn't last a long time, it's called acute diarrhea. Usually it lasts just a day or two.

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

Diarrhea takes water from your body. It can cause you to lose too much water—a problem called dehydration. This can be a very serious problem, especially for the very young and the very old.

What is the cause?

Nearly everyone gets acute diarrhea at one time or another. It can happen when you eat or drink something that has germs in it or when you have stomach flu. It may be caused by:

- Infection with bacteria, viruses, or parasites, such as food poisoning or stomach flu
- Contaminated water, for example, when you are camping
- Medicine, especially antibiotics
- Sensitivity to certain kinds of foods, such as foods high in fats, sugar, fiber, or lactose (the sugar in milk products)
- Food allergies
- Anxiety

What are the symptoms?

You have loose, watery, unformed bowel movements or you have more bowel movements than usual for you. You may also have pain or cramping in your belly, fever, or nausea.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare 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 healthcare provider will probably advise you to drink plenty of clear fluids. Sports drinks or other oral rehydration solutions (ORS) can help you

replace lost salts as well as fluid. You can make a rehydration solution with packets from the drugstore or you can make the drink 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, such as sodas (like 7UP), 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 or parasites like Giardia.

If you are already taking an antibiotic for another illness and it seems to be causing the diarrhea, your provider may ask you to stop taking that antibiotic. You may be given a different antibiotic to treat the other illness.

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. Ask your healthcare provider if you can take aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen to control your fever.

- Check with your provider before you give any medicine that contains aspirin or salicylates to a child or teen. This includes medicines like baby aspirin, some cold medicines, and Pepto-Bismol. Children and teens who take aspirin are at risk for a serious illness called Reye's syndrome.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen and aspirin, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, do not take for more than 10 days for any reason.

If you have cramps or stomach pain, it may help to put a hot water bottle or heating pad on your stomach. Cover the hot water bottle with a towel or set an electric heating pad on low so you don't burn your skin.

It's OK to keep eating as long as it doesn't seem to make the diarrhea or stomach cramps worse. Foods that are easiest to digest are bananas, cooked cereal (like oatmeal or cream of wheat), plain rice or noodles, gelatin, eggs, toast or bread, crackers, cooked potatoes or carrots, and applesauce. Don't add butter or margarine to these foods. Avoid milk products and caffeine for a few days.

If you would like to let your bowel rest for a few hours, don't eat anything and drink only clear liquids. Clear liquids include water, weak tea, broth, apple or grape juice mixed with water, and sports drinks or other oral rehydration drinks.

You may also drink light-colored soft drinks without caffeine (like 7 UP) after stirring until the bubbles are gone. Drink enough clear fluids to keep your urine light yellow in color. If you don't drink enough, you may get dehydrated. Getting 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.

You can go back to your normal diet after 2 or 3 days, but for several days avoid fresh fruit (other than bananas), alcohol, and greasy or fatty foods like cheeseburgers, pizza, or bacon. Also avoid highly seasoned or spicy foods and most raw vegetables. It's OK to eat cooked carrots, potatoes, and squash. If eating seems to make the diarrhea worse, let your bowel rest for a few hours by drinking just clear liquids.

You can buy nonprescription medicine to treat diarrhea at the drugstore. If you use it, make sure you use only the dose recommended on the package. Don't use the medicine for more than 2 days without checking with your healthcare provider. If you have chronic health problems, always check with your provider before you use any medicine for diarrhea.

Call your healthcare provider if:

- You have cramps or abdominal pain that lasts more than a day, gets very bad, or affects only 1 area of your belly.
- You have signs of dehydration such as dry mouth, excessive thirst, little or no urination, severe weakness, dizziness, or lightheadedness.
- You have a fever of 101.5°F (38.6°C) or higher.
- The diarrhea lasts longer than 3 days.
- You have blood or mucus in your bowel movements.
- You have other symptoms that worry you.

How can I 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 water for 15 seconds 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 when you prepare or serve the food.
- 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 with soap and warm water after you use the restroom and before you eat.
- Make sure that the fruit juices and dairy products that you eat and drink have been pasteurized.

- Serve food right after it has been cooked or reheated. Refrigerate food promptly after meals.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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