

# Acute Diarrhea: Brief Version

## What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea means having loose bowel movements often. If it starts all of a sudden and doesn't last a long time, it's called acute diarrhea. Nearly everyone gets this kind of diarrhea once in a while. It can happen when you eat or drink something that has germs in it or when you have stomach flu. It can also happen if you are sensitive to certain kinds of foods. Some medicines can cause diarrhea.

## What are the symptoms?

- You have many loose bowel movements.
- You may have pain or cramping in your belly.
- You may have a fever or upset stomach.

## How is it treated?

Diarrhea takes water from your body. It can cause you to lose too much water. This can be a serious problem, especially for the very young and the very old. You will need to drink plenty of clear fluids, like water, weak tea, and broth. Your healthcare provider may suggest that you drink a special drink that gives lost fluid and salts back to your body. Gatorade and Pedialyte are examples of this type of drink.

Your healthcare provider may give you antibiotics if your diarrhea is being caused by bacteria.

If medicine you are taking is causing the diarrhea, your provider may ask you to stop taking it.

Most of the time acute diarrhea lasts less than 3 days. Sometimes it goes away after just a few hours. Other times it can take as long as 2 weeks for your bowel habits to get back to what is normal for you.

## How can I take care of myself?

If your temperature is over 100°F (37.8°C):

- Rest as much as you can.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- Take your temperature every day. Write it down.

If you have cramps or pain in your belly, you can:

- Put a hot water bottle on your belly. Wrap a towel around it so you don't burn your skin.
- Use an electric heating pad set on low.
- Drink only clear liquids, like water, weak tea, and broth.
- Drink a soft drink with no caffeine (like 7 UP). Let it go flat first.

- Suck on ice chips if you feel too sick to eat or drink.

At first it may help to not eat solid foods or to eat just soft, starchy foods. Try bananas, cooked cereal, rice, potatoes, dry toast or bread, and applesauce.

After 2 or 3 days you can go back to most of the foods you are used to eating. For a few days, stay away from:

- Milk, butter, cream, and cheese
- Raw fruit (except bananas)
- Raw vegetables (cooked carrots, potatoes, and squash are fine)
- Alcohol
- Fatty foods, like cheeseburgers, pizza, or bacon
- Spicy foods
- Caffeine

It's usually best to avoid taking medicines to stop diarrhea. The medicines can cause other problems. If you cannot control the diarrhea with clear liquids and soft starchy foods, ask your healthcare provider if you should try diarrhea medicines.

## **How can I help prevent it?**

There are some things you can do to help keep from getting diarrhea:

- Always wash your hands with soap and warm water after you use the restroom and before you eat.
- If you care for small children, always wash your hands after changing diapers or helping them use the toilet.
- Make sure fruit juices and foods made from milk have been pasteurized.
- Serve or refrigerate food right after it has been cooked.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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