



Diarrhea



Diarrhea occurs when body wastes are discharged from the bowel more often and in a more liquid state than usual.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Frequent watery, loose stools
- Cramping or pain in the abdomen

CAUSES

Common causes are infections that affect the digestive system, food allergies, overuse of laxatives or alcohol, and taking some antibiotics. Diarrhea is also a symptom of lactose intolerance, diverticulitis, food poisoning, ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

TREATMENT

Self-care usually treats diarrhea. The goal is to replace lost fluids and minerals to prevent dehydration.

TRIAGE QUESTIONS

With diarrhea, does an adult have any of these problems?

- Bloody, maroon, or tarlike stools. Very severe abdominal or rectal pain.
- Signs of severe dehydration.

NO
↓

YES ➡

GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE

With diarrhea, does a child have any of these problems?

- Sunken eyes. Dry skin that doesn't spring back when pinched.
- Dry diaper for more than 3 hours in an infant. Passing no urine for more than 6 hours in a child.
- Weak cry. Acting weak and very sleepy or cranky.

NO
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YES ➡

GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE

Are any of these problems present in adults?

- Diarrhea lasts 48 hours or longer and occurs with a fever. Diarrhea occurs with vomiting that lasts and keeps you from drinking fluids.
- Diarrhea follows foreign travel or antibiotic use.

NO
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YES ➡

SEE DOCTOR

Does an infant or sick, elder person have diarrhea more than 8 times per day or for longer than 24 hours?

NO
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YES ➡

CALL DOCTOR

Are medicines being taken? (Medicines may not be working because of the diarrhea. Or, medicines, including herbal products, may be causing the diarrhea.)

NO
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YES ➡

CALL DOCTOR

Did diarrhea occur when you were in another country or shortly after coming back?

NO
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YES ➡

CALL DOCTOR

USE SELF-CARE



SELF-CARE / PREVENTION

If vomiting is also present, treat for vomiting first.

Prevent dehydration:

- Drink plenty of water and other fluids, such as sports drinks and broths.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine or alcohol.
- Avoid having high “simple” sugar drinks, like apple juice, grape juice, and sodas. These can make the diarrhea persist. Or, dilute juices and sodas with water.

If you have signs of dehydration seek medical care. Until you get care, drink fluids:

- Broths and sports drinks
- For children less than 2 years old, give over-the-counter mixtures, such as Pedialyte as advised by their doctors. Do not give them sports drinks.
- Keep breastfeeding your baby if you are nursing. If you are using formula, make it full strength unless your doctor gives you different advice.

Until the Diarrhea Stops

- Avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Choose foods that don’t upset your stomach.
- Do not have foods that are greasy, high in fiber, or sweet.
- Avoid milk, but try yogurt that has live cultures of lactobacillus acidophilus (unless you are lactose intolerant).
- Adults can try an over-the-counter medicine, such as Imodium A-D or Pepto-Bismol. Follow the directions on the label. {**Note:** Stools can become black after taking Pepto-Bismol. Also, do not give aspirin or any medication that has salicylates to anyone under 19 years of age, due to its link to Reye’s syndrome.}
- Follow a light diet. Foods and small meals that are easy to digest may include:
 - Bananas
 - Plain rice
 - Boiled potatoes
 - Toast
 - Crackers
 - Cooked carrots
 - Baked chicken
 - Soups with vegetables and noodles or rice
- Don’t exercise too hard.
- Wash your hands after you go to the toilet and before you prepare food. Use paper towels to dry your hands. Throw the towels away.