

# Diarrhea



**KANAKIA**  
Health Care

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### What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is the passing of frequent, loose or liquid stools. The number of bowel movements vary greatly – from three times a day to three times a week. Diarrhea can be acute, starting suddenly and lasting a short time, or chronic, lasting a long time.

### What are the symptoms of diarrhea?

The main symptom is frequent, loose, watery stools. Associated symptoms can include:

- Abdominal pain and cramps
- Fever
- Chills
- Mucus and/or blood in stools
- Bloating, nausea, vomiting
- Lack of bowel control
- Dehydration symptoms
  - Dry mouth
  - Increased thirst
  - Dry eyes
  - Little or no urination
  - Weakness, fatigue
  - Dizziness
  - Dark colored urine

### What are the causes of acute diarrhea?

Various illnesses and conditions can cause diarrhea. The most common is gastroenteritis, which is usually caused by a virus. Other causes include:

- Food contaminated with bacteria or parasites (often called food poisoning)

- Side effects of some medicines e.g. antibiotics, magnesium containing antacids, cancer drug
- Anxiety
- Excess alcohol

### What are the causes of chronic diarrhea?

- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Crohn's disease
- Ulcerative colitis
- Diverticulitis
- HIV infection
- Tropical diseases
  - Cholera
  - Dysentery
  - Giardiasis
- Lactose intolerance
- Fructose
- Artificial sweeteners

### What are the tests to diagnose cause of diarrhea?

In acute diarrhea:

- Stool test
- Complete blood count (CBC)

In chronic diarrhea, further tests may be necessary:

- Barium enema
- Sigmoidoscopy
- Colonoscopy

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### What is the treatment for diarrhea?

Most cases of diarrhea recover without any treatment in a couple of days. In mild to moderate diarrhea, drink extra fluids containing water, salt and sugar. In case oral fluids is not tolerated or in severe diarrhea, intravenous (IV) fluids may have to be given. Once symptoms improve, soft, bland food can be taken.

Children with diarrhea must be given oral rehydration solutions (ORS).

Over the counter medicines can be taken to reduce diarrhea e.g. loperamide, diphenoxylate-atropine. Antibiotics may be needed in some bacterial and parasitic infections.

If an antibiotic has caused the diarrhea, your doctor may decrease the dose or change the antibiotic.

Frequent hand washing by lathering with soap for at least 20 seconds is effective in preventing spread of infection to family, friends and co-workers. Use alcohol based hand sanitizer when washing is not possible. Your doctor will treat the underlying cause, if present.

### How to prevent diarrhea?

Children can be given vaccine for rotavirus. Other general measures can be taken to prevent diarrhea.

- Eat hot, well-cooked foods.
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables, unless you can peel them or wash them thoroughly
- Avoid raw (unpasteurized) milk or foods that contain unpasteurized milk
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards

- after handling uncooked food
- Refrigerate foods promptly

### When to consult your doctor?

- Severe watery diarrhea with dehydration
- Frequent small stools containing mucus and blood
- Bloody or black diarrhea
- Fever > 101F
- Persistent or severe abdominal pain
- Passage of  $\geq 6$  unformed stools per 24 hours or illness that lasts more than 48 hours

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