

Diarrhoea during cancer treatment

Information for patients

Diarrhoea is passing bowel motions (stools or poo) more often than usual. The motions can be soft or watery.

If you are likely to have diarrhoea, your doctor will talk to you about medicine to help with it.

It is important to tell your doctor or nurse if you have diarrhoea.

What are the symptoms?

When you have diarrhoea, your bowels are opened (poo) more often. When you go, you may have:

- loose motions
- watery motions
- cramping
- wind or flatulence (gas)
- pain in rectum (bottom).

If diarrhoea is severe your body may lose too much water. This can cause dehydration.

Signs of dehydration include:

- dry mouth and feeling thirsty
- feeling tired and weak
- headaches
- feeling lightheaded, dizzy or confused
- urine (wee) is darker colour and you go less often or there is less of it
- fast heartbeat.



What causes diarrhoea when you're having cancer treatment?

Some cancer treatments can cause diarrhoea. These include some types of:

- chemotherapy
- immunotherapy
- targeted therapy.

Also, radiation therapy to the pelvis/abdomen (belly and lower belly) can cause diarrhoea.

Sometimes diarrhoea may happen due to:

- bowel problems
- infections, either bacteria or viruses
- antibiotics.

Things to ask your doctor or nurse:

- Am I likely to get diarrhoea?
- What medicine can I take?
- Should I change what I eat?
- What should I drink and how much?
- If I get pain in my bottom what do I do?
- Should I keep a diary of how often I have bowel motions?
- Should I see a dietitian for advice about what to eat and drink?

Contact numbers:

Daytime: _____

Night/weekend: _____

Tips to help prevent or treat diarrhoea

- if you have been given medicine to prevent diarrhoea, take it as advised by your doctor, nurse or pharmacist
- if you have been taking medicine to help you open your bowels (do poo) stop taking it.

What to do:

- drink plenty of water (about 6-8 glasses a day) or oral rehydration solutions (available from chemists)
- eat small meals and eat more often
- eat foods that are easy to digest, like bananas, rice, white bread, pasta, crackers, stewed or canned fruit, steamed chicken without the skin, white fish, eggs or jelly.

Food and drinks to avoid:

- fatty, fried or spicy foods
- milk and dairy products
- caffeine, alcohol or fizzy drinks
- raw fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes, and cereals (e.g. cabbage and cauliflower may cause wind or cramping).

Some medicines used to treat cancer can cause very severe diarrhoea

Contact your doctor or nurse immediately if you have:

- uncontrolled diarrhoea even after taking anti-diarrhoea medicine
- blood in your bowel motions (poo)
- severe stomach pains and bloating
- sudden or new vomiting as well
- signs of dehydration
- a temperature of 38°C or higher

Use the contact numbers you have been given. If you can't get hold of anyone, go to your nearest hospital emergency department for assessment.

Common questions

Why is diarrhoea a problem?

It is uncomfortable and affects how you feel.

Severe diarrhoea can cause dehydration and malnourishment (low vitamins and minerals).

Can medicines help diarrhoea?

There are a number of medicines that work in different ways to help prevent or treat diarrhoea.

It is very important to take these medicines as directed.

If you are unsure about how much and what medicine to take ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for advice.

If my anal area (bottom) gets sore what can I do?

Keep the area clean. Use baby wipes to clean the area.

Apply soothing creams. Ask your doctor nurse or pharmacist which is best.

Have a warm bath and add salt.

Wear loose-fitting clothes and cotton underwear.



For information for patient and carers please scan the QR code.