

Diarrhoea during cancer treatment

This resource is for people who are experiencing diarrhoea. It provides suggestions for how to manage this symptom, while continuing to eat and drink enough.

Diarrhoea is passing bowel motions more often than usual. The motions can often be loose and watery.

Some cancer treatments can cause diarrhoea, including chemotherapy, immunotherapy and radiotherapy to the abdomen or pelvis.

Other causes of diarrhoea may be antibiotics, other medications, stress or anxiety, infections, food poisoning or food intolerance. In these cases, it is important to treat the underlying cause. If you are unsure of the cause – speak to your Doctor.

Ongoing diarrhoea can cause you to lose water or liquids from your body and is called dehydration. Diarrhoea may cause you to lose weight and stop you from eating well.

Eating well, drinking plenty of fluids and maintaining your weight are very important during cancer treatment. A Dietitian can help to manage these symptoms and improve your food and fluid intake.

Tips for keeping hydrated:

- Try to drink about 8 glasses of liquids throughout the day, including *diluted* juice, *weak* cordial, soup or broth, herbal teas, nutritional supplements, such as Sustagen or Ensure.
- You may need oral rehydration drinks to replace lost electrolytes, such as Hydralyte or Gastrolyte.
- Monitor your urine as darker coloured urine or a reduced volume may be signs of dehydration.

Tips for eating well:

- It is important to continue eating to avoid weight loss.
- Eat small amounts often, try 6 smaller meals each day instead of three larger ones. Try to eat something every 2 hours.
- If you are losing weight without trying, have nourishing drinks, such as milk drinks, smoothies or nutritional supplements, instead of water or other clear fluids as these provide little nourishment.



There might be times of the day when you feel more like eating – make the most of these times and eat what you can.

A few changes to your diet may be helpful to prevent your diarrhoea from becoming worse in the short term.

How can I manage my symptoms?

General dietary tips

- Limiting foods that are fatty, fried or spicy.
- Limiting caffeine from drinks such as tea, coffee and soft drinks.
- Reducing sugar-free or diet products that contain sorbitol, mannitol and xylitol (such as diet soft drinks, mints and gum).
- Limiting high fibre foods such as the skins of fruit and vegetables, bran, nuts and seeds as they can sometimes make symptoms worse.
- Lactose free milk and dairy products may be better tolerated, such as Zymil, Lidells or soy milk.
- Plain foods that are lower in fibre may be better tolerated. Try

bananas, canned or stewed fruit, white rice and pasta, potatoes, white bread, and well-cooked oats.

How do I know if I am eating and drinking enough?

- Check your weight once a week. If you are losing weight it could mean that you are not getting enough nourishment from food.
- Speak to your Dietitian if you are losing weight or if you are having trouble eating enough.

Medications:

- Your Doctor may prescribe regular medication if your diarrhoea is severe or ongoing.
- Check with your Doctor to make sure that none of the other medications you are taking are making your diarrhoea worse.

If diarrhoea persists, talk to your Doctor or Nurse about regular anti-diarrhoea medication.

If you are unable to drink enough fluid, see your Doctor. You may need rehydration via a drip.