Diarrhoea during cancer treatment

Diarrhoea is the frequent passing of loose and watery bowel movements.

**What are the effects?**

- Diarrhoea can increase the risk of dehydration and weight loss.
- Rapid weight loss could be due to dehydration. If you are losing weight rapidly, seek urgent medical attention.
- Diarrhoea can also affect your desire to eat.

Nutrition is very important during cancer treatment. You need to stay well hydrated, eat well and maintain your weight.

**Causes during cancer treatment:**

Diarrhoea is a common side effect of cancer or its treatment. Chemotherapy can cause diarrhoea and so can radiation to the bowel or pelvic area.

‘Overflow’ diarrhoea is different. It is a result of chronic constipation. When the bowel is blocked by hard impacted faeces, some liquid may seep past and appear like diarrhoea.

Diarrhoea may also be caused by antibiotics, other medications, stress or anxiety, viruses, bacterial infection, 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.

Some diarrhoea may be unpreventable during cancer treatment. Your health care team will give advice to manage and prevent any problems.

**What is the treatment?**

- **Medications**
- **Adequate fluids**
- **Maintaining good nutrition with small frequent meals**

**Medications:**

Take anti-diarrhoeal medication as prescribed by your Doctor. Make sure that none of the other medications you are taking will make your diarrhoea worse. Check this with your Doctor.

**Tips for keeping hydrated:**
Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Aim for at least 2 litres of fluid per day.

Hydrating fluids include diluted juice, weak cordial, soup or broth, herbal teas, milk drinks and nutrition supplements e.g. sustagen, ensure.

You may need oral rehydration drinks to replace lost electrolytes. Your pharmacist can give you more information on these products e.g. hydralyte, gastrolyte.

How do I know if I am eating enough?

Monitor your weight once a week. Losing weight 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.

Tips for eating well:

- It is important to continue eating to avoid weight loss.
- Eat small frequent meals – try to eat something every 2-3 hours.
- Choose foods that are high in energy and protein.
- If losing weight unintentionally, have nourishing fluids, such as milk drinks and nutrition supplements, instead of water or other clear fluids as these provide little nutrition.

Other diet suggestions:

A few short-term diet changes may be helpful to prevent your diarrhoea from becoming worse. It is best to talk to your Dietitian about any changes to your diet that may help you. Your Dietitian can advise on appropriate food choices to suit your needs.

Avoid large amounts of:

- juice, soft drink and cordial
- coffee, tea and alcohol
- fatty, sweet or spicy foods
- insoluble fibre e.g. wheat bran, rice bran, the skins of fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, dried beans and wholegrain foods
- Artificial sweeteners in sugar-free products such as gum and lollies

There is no evidence to support the avoidance of dairy products. In severe cases of diarrhoea, low lactose products may be better tolerated e.g. Zymil, Liddells, soy milk.

Foods that are high in soluble fibre such as oats, white bread, white rice, pasta, and bananas may be beneficial.

Please discuss any concerns with your Doctor if diarrhoea persists.