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, 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, especially water, to prevent dehydration. Aim for at least 2 litres of fluid per day.
- You may need oral rehydration drinks to replace lost electrolytes such as sodium. Your pharmacist can give you more information on these products e.g. hydralyte, gastrolyte.

Tips for eating well:

- It is important to continue eating to avoid weight loss.
- Eat small frequent meals.
- Choose foods that are high in energy and protein.

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.

Other diet suggestions:

A few short term diet changes may be helpful to prevent your diarrhoea from becoming worse. As everyone is different it is best to talk to your Dietitian about any changes to your diet that may help you.

Your Dietitian can advise you on appropriate food choices to suit your individual needs.

Avoid large amounts of:

- juice, soft drinks 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)
- sugar alcohols (artificial sweeteners) found in sugar-free products such as gum and lollies

If diarrhoea persists or if you are concerned, please discuss with your Doctor.