

# Diarrhea related to cancer treatments (chemotherapy or radiation therapy)



You may have some side effects during your treatments. Diarrhea is one of them. Here are some simple, effective ways to relieve diarrhea.

Diarrhea means loose or liquid bowel movements that are more frequent than usual: 3 or more bowel movements a day. You may also have gas or pain in your belly, bloating (your belly feels swollen) or stomach cramps.

## What should I do to relieve diarrhea?

Here are some tips:

- > Eat 5 or 6 small, light meals a day instead of 3 big meals.
- > Drink 8 to 10 glasses of liquid every day (water, rehydration drinks, bouillon, etc.) **unless your doctor tells you to limit your liquids intake.**
- > Eat less of the following foods:
  - food and drinks that contain caffeine: coffee, tea, cola, chocolate, etc.
  - alcohol
  - fibre-rich foods: raw fruit and vegetables, fruit juice, wholegrain bread and pasta, nuts, legumes, dates, raisins, papaya, rhubarb, lettuce or cabbage, and brown rice.
  - dairy products (milk, ice cream, yogurt, cheese); if you can tolerate dairy products, try the lactose-free ones
  - avoid prunes and prune juice
  - fatty foods, including deep-fried food
  - spicy food



## How should I go back to my regular way of eating after having diarrhea?

12 to 14 hours after your diarrhea has stopped, you can gradually go back to eating normally. It's better to eat a little each time and have several small meals to give your intestines a rest.

**Attention!** Do not take Imodium unless your care team recommends it.

## A simple and effective remedy

**The BRAT diet** (Bananas, Rice, Applesauce and Toast (or crackers)) is a good way to gradually get back to your normal eating habits. Don't follow the BRAT diet for very long, though. Contact your care team for more information.

If you had a serious episode of diarrhea, some foods can help build up your reserves of 2 essential minerals, sodium and potassium:

- soup (salty bouillons)
- decarbonated ginger ale
- ice pops
- sports drinks (e.g. Powerade or Gatorade)
- store-bought rehydration drinks (e.g. Gastrolyte or Pedialyte)



Here's a temporary home made solution while you're waiting to get rehydration drinks if necessary.

Mix:

- 360 ml unsweetened orange juice
- 600 ml chilled boiled water
- 2.5 ml (1/2 tsp) salt

## What should I do for irritated skin?

Diarrhea can irritate the skin on your buttocks near the anus. Here are some simple tips for avoiding and easing irritation:

- wipe your anus gently with a damp washcloth or disposable baby wipe instead of toilet paper
- don't use any soap or perfumed products when you take a bath
- apply a waterproof ointment (e.g., zinc oxide cream) to protect the skin of the anus
- take a warm bath for 10 minutes

## Can diarrhea cause complications?

The main possible complication is **dehydration**

- when the body is low in water. This can cause the loss of important elements we call "electrolytes." Here are some signs and symptoms that show your body needs more water:

- thirst
- dry mouth and dry skin
- dizziness and weakness
- less frequent need to urinate
- darker urine than usual

If you notice any of these symptoms, call your care team right away.

## What other signs and symptoms should I watch for?

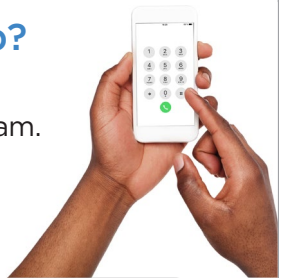
Tell your care team right away if:

- the diarrhea lasts longer than 24 hours
- you have diarrhea more than 4 times a day
- you have cramps or severe stomach pain
- there is blood in your stools
- you have a fever (over 38.3 °C or 100.9 °F)

If you can't reach a member of your care team, go to a hospital emergency room or a medical clinic.

## Who should I call for help?

If you have questions, feel free to contact a member of your care team.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society:

> **1 888 939-3333**

> **cancer.ca**

Cancer information → Diagnosis and treatment → Managing side effects  
Diarrhea

National Cancer Institute (U.S.):

> **cancer.gov**

About cancer → Cancer treatment → Side effects → Diarrhea

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available (in French only). Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site

**chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante**

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

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