

How to Manage **Diarrhea** at Home

This guide will help you understand:

What is diarrhea?

What causes diarrhea?

What you can do to help manage your diarrhea.

When you should talk to your healthcare team.

One:carepath gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the many patients, caregivers and providers that were involved in preparing this Symptom Self-Management Guide.

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is when you have loose, watery stools [*poop*] more than 3 or 4 times a day. It can last for a few hours or a long time. Anyone can get diarrhea; however, it is a common symptom in older adults and those with certain medical conditions. Diarrhea can cause:

- A need to go to the bathroom right away. You may not be able to stop yourself from having a bowel movement [*poop/stools/going to the bathroom*].
- Stomach cramps [*a tightening in your stomach that causes pain and feels uncomfortable*]. It can happen suddenly and can last a few seconds to several minutes; especially right before you feel the urge to go to the bathroom. It usually goes away once you have been to the bathroom.
- Bloating [*Your belly feels hard and your clothes feel tight around your belly*].
- Sore skin in the area around your bottom, caused by going to the bathroom a lot.
- Dehydration when your body loses too much water. You may feel thirsty, have a dry mouth/tongue and dark yellow pee.



Tell your healthcare team if you have diarrhea and are finding it difficult to manage.

What causes diarrhea?

There can be many causes of diarrhea, for example, eating foods that upset your stomach, anxiety, stress or an infection. Other causes many include:

- **Chronic conditions:** Cancer, Irritable Bowel Disease and Crohn Disease.
- **Medications:** Like laxatives, antibiotics and some natural health/vitamin supplements.
- **Treatments:** Chemotherapy treatments for cancer can also cause diarrhea.

What you can do to help manage your diarrhea.

Managing diarrhea works best when you play an active role.

- Try to figure out if there is a cause for your diarrhea.
- Is it better or worse at different times?
- What helps or makes it worse?
- You may want to use a symptom diary to record information about your diarrhea. Tracking this information will help you talk to healthcare team about your diarrhea.

Physical steps you can try:

- **Medication:** If you take medication for your diarrhea, take it as prescribed so your symptom doesn't get too bad.
- **Stop laxatives or stool softeners:** If you usually take these, you might have to stop taking them while you have diarrhea. Always talk with your healthcare team before you start or stop medications.
- **Plan ahead:** If you have to go out find out where the nearest bathroom is. Use the bathroom before you go out, bring a change of clothes, and if you think you might have an accident, wear absorbent throw-away underwear.

- **Drink small amounts more often:** Drink slowly and choose water, sports drinks, diluted juice or broth. It will help replace the water you are losing by having diarrhea. Talk to your doctor first if you have fluid restrictions.
- **Eat small amounts more often:** Try to eat smaller meals and snacks instead of 2 or 3 larger meals. Remove all skins, seeds and peels from fruits and vegetables.
- **Eat slowly:** Take small bites and take time to chew food.
- **Change your diet:** Some food can make diarrhea worse.

What foods to choose:

- Peeled apples, pears, bananas, potatoes, carrots and applesauce.
- White rice, pasta and oatmeal.
- Protein from foods like eggs, skinless chicken, low-fat yogurt and smooth peanut butter.

What to avoid:

- Anything with artificial sweeteners such as, sugar-free gum, candy, cough drops or diet drinks.
- Spicy food, onion and garlic.
- Fried or fatty foods such as gravy and rich sauces.
- High fibre foods such as whole wheat, brown or wild rice, quinoa, raw vegetables, corn, beans and fruit juice with pulp.
- Alcohol, caffeine, prune juice and fizzy drinks such as pop.
- Milk and other dairy products.

Taking care of your skin:

Diarrhea can make the skin around your bum area sore and painful to touch. Below are a few things you can try:

- **Wear cotton underwear:** Boxer shorts with no elastic around the legs are a good choice.
- **Creams:** Ointments with zinc oxide can help protect your skin. Try and leave your bottom open to the air as much as possible.
- **If pee splashes your skin:** Try to sit differently on the toilet. Clean the sore area with warm water and pat dry.
- **Avoid:** Talc, perfume or scented toiletries on broken skin.
- **Take a sitz bath:** A sitz bath is a warm soak for your bum area. You can do this in a bath tub or buy a plastic sitz bath from the pharmacy that fits over your toilet seat. You can have as many sitz baths as you like for 10-15 minutes at a time.

Benefits of a sitz bath:

- It cleans and soothes your skin,
- Lowers the chance of getting an infection, and
- Helps get blood flowing to the sore area to speed up healing.

When you should talk to your healthcare team.

Speak with your healthcare team if diarrhea is a problem for you. Your worries and questions are important to you and them. Your healthcare team may speak to you about the different medications you can take.

- Let them know if you think your medical condition or medications are the reason for your diarrhea.
- Let your healthcare team know if a medication is working for you or if you're having side effects. You may have to try a few different ones to know what works best for you.
- Talk to them before taking over-the-counter medication, including vitamins and herbal remedies.

Tell your healthcare team right away if your diarrhea is getting worse or if you see blood or pus in your diarrhea.

Tips on sharing your symptoms with your healthcare team:

Make some notes about your diarrhea symptoms and tell your healthcare team about them.

- Has there been a change in your diarrhea?
- How bad is it?
- When does it happen and how long does it last?
- What makes it better or worse? What have you tried already?
- Make a list of all the medications you are taking including over the counter medications.

Notes:
