Symptom Management

Diarrhea

What is Diarrhea

- Diarrhea is defined as more than two loose or watery stools (“poop”), per day
- Diarrhea is the opposite of constipation (hard or infrequent stools)
- Diarrhea can be “acute” (short-lasting) or “chronic” (long-lasting)
- Diarrhea can be caused by infections, disease (e.g. diabetes, celiac disease), cancer, surgery, medications (e.g. antibiotics, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like celecoxib (Celebrex), ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin etc.), and naprosyn (Aleve)), herbal remedies, anxiety, or stress
- Diarrhea is a common side effect of cancer treatment, such as radiation near the bowels. Diarrhea may also be caused by chemotherapy.

It is very important to manage diarrhea, as it can lead to dehydration, depletion of body salts, weakness, weight loss, skin soreness, poor nutrition as well as delays in your radiation or chemotherapy treatments.

What to expect in your care

Diarrhea may start at anytime after your cancer treatment begins. Follow the specific instructions given to you by your health care team regarding what to do if you develop diarrhea.

You need to learn strategies for controlling diarrhea, and you need to learn when you should get in touch with your health care team.

In addition, let your health care team know immediately if:

- Your stools (“poop”) have blood or mucus
- You have watery stools more than twice a day
- You have a temperature of 100.5F (38°C) or greater
- You have very painful cramping and/or very painful stomach (abdominal) pain
- You are throwing up (vomiting) a lot and cannot eat or drink without throwing up
- You are extremely thirsty
- You become dizzy and weak
- You notice your urine (“pee”) becoming darker yellow in colour, or even brown
- You develop pain in your upper right abdomen, under your ribs

People with severe dehydration may need to receive intravenous (through a vein) fluids.

Watery stools may be diarrhea or may actually be a sign of constipation. If you are having watery stools, you may need to be examined for a fecal impaction (a large lump of dry, hard stool that is stuck in your rectum). People sometimes mistake watery stools for diarrhea and take anti-diarrhea medications. This only makes the problem worse.
What you can do

- If you have to stay in bed, use a bedside commode (portable toilet) when possible
- Keep a record of your bowel movements (“poops”) and what you eat
- Keep a list of foods that cause you more problems and try to avoid them
- Eating can often trigger a bowel movement, so schedule your meals to allow enough time to move your bowels (go “poop”) before planned activities

To protect your skin, keep the anal area clean with soap and water, or a special cleanser if the skin is broken down. Ask your nurse if you do not know what product to use for this. You can also take sitz baths (warm, shallow baths) to soothe the area.

Antidiarrheal Medications

Medications are available by prescription through your oncologist, family doctor, or over the counter at a pharmacy. Tell your health care team if you are considering taking medication for diarrhea so they can make sure it is not caused by an infection first.

Food Ideas to help with Diarrhea

You may find the following nutrition tips helpful:

- Stay well-hydrated drink a variety of fluids daily to prevent dehydration. It may help to sip fluids slowly. Examples of fluids are: water, juice, liquid nutritional drinks such as Ensure®, sports drinks, soups and herbal tea. Limit caffeine or drinks that contain alcohol.
- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks. Try to eat every 2-3 hours.
- Limit high fibre foods such as whole grain breads and cereals with bran, nuts, seeds, beans, peas and lentils. Instead choose white bread or pasta, white rice, meat, poultry, eggs and tofu.
- Remove skins, seeds and membranes from fruits and vegetables.
- Limit corn, broccoli, beans, green leafy vegetables, prunes, berries, dried fruit.
- Avoid spicy deep fried and greasy foods.
- If it makes your diarrhea worse, try avoiding milk and milk products. Lactaid® milk or milk substitutes such as soy beverages may be better tolerated.
- Once the diarrhea is resolved, re-introduce the foods you have eliminated one at a time.

If your symptoms are not well-controlled after following the above guidelines, if you are losing weight or your appetite is decreased, ask to see a dietitian. Or call 8-1-1 to speak to an oncology dietitian at Health Link BC.

Learn More


BCCA pamphlets: Nutrition Handouts for Managing Eating Difficulties http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/nutrition/nutrition-handouts