# Symptom Management Guidelines: CANCER – RELATED DIARRHEA

## Definition

Cancer – Related Diarrhea (CRD): An abnormal increase in stool frequency, volume, and liquidity that is different from the usual patterns of bowel elimination; results from cancer or related treatment(s)

## Contributing Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cancer Related</strong></td>
<td>- Neuroendocrine tumors (e.g. VIPomas, carcinoid, gastrinomas)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Lymphoma</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Graft vs. host disease after bone marrow transplant</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cancer Treatment Related</strong></td>
<td>- Capecitabine</td>
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<td>- 5 – fluorouracil</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Irinotecan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Leucovorin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Most small molecule oral tyrosine kinase inhibitors</td>
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<td>- Immunotherapy – Checkpoint inhibitors (e.g. Iplilimumab)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Biotherapy (e.g. high dose Interferon or Interleukin – 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radiation Therapy</strong></td>
<td>- Pelvis, abdomen, lumbar, para-aortic fields</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Surgical History</strong></td>
<td>- Celiac plexus block</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Large or small bowel resection</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Cholecystectomy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Pancreaticoduodenectomy (whipple procedure)</td>
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<td>- Vagotomy</td>
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<td>- Terminal ileal resection and loss of ileocecal valve</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Medications</strong></td>
<td>- Laxatives (e.g. stool softeners, stimulant bulk laxatives)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Antibiotics (e.g. cephalixin, amoxicillin, clindamycin, clavulanic acid-amoxicillin)</td>
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<td>- Prokinetic agents (e.g. metoclopramide)</td>
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<td>- Narcotic withdrawal</td>
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<td>- Antihypertensives</td>
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<td>- Non- steroidal anti – inflammatory agents (NSAIDs)</td>
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<td>- Potassium supplements</td>
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<td>- Magnesium-containing antacids</td>
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<td>- Liquid medications containing sorbitol (e.g. acetaminophen elixir)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Hypertonic liquid medications</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Other (e.g. misoprostol)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relevant Medical History</strong></td>
<td>- Partial bowel obstruction, fecal impaction with overflow</td>
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<tr>
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<td>- Obstruction of common bile duct</td>
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<td>- Inflammatory bowel disease (e.g. Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Irritable bowel syndrome, diverticulitis, ischemic colitis</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Diabetes</td>
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<td>- Hyperthyroidism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Hypoalbuminemia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Conditions that may require use of warfarin (e.g. venous thrombosis, cardiac surgeries)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>- Advanced age</td>
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<td>- Anxiety, stress</td>
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<td>- Recent travel</td>
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<td>- Infection- viral (e.g. norovirus), bacterial (e.g. C.difficile, E.coli), parasitic, sexually transmitted</td>
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<td>- Post-pyloric hyperosmolar feedings and/or high feeding rate</td>
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<td>- Lactose intolerance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Herbal supplements (e.g. milk thistle, aloe, cayenne, saw palmetto, ginseng)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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## Consequences
- Risk for severe dehydration and electrolyte imbalances, cardiovascular compromise
- Risk for infection, sepsis
- Chemotherapy dose delays, reductions, discontinuation of treatment
- Quality of life – distress, compromised role function, decreased functional status, exacerbation of other symptoms
- Diarrhea may result in increased INR, or increased risk of bleeding for patients on warfarin

## Focused Health Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERAL ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>SYMPTOM ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contact and General Information</strong></td>
<td><strong>Normal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Vital Signs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Physician name - oncologist, family physician</td>
<td>- What are your normal bowel habits?</td>
<td>- As clinically indicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pharmacy</td>
<td>- Do you have an ostomy? If so, how many times do you normally empty/change the bag?</td>
<td>- <em>HR and BP-supine and sitting, temperature</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Home health care</td>
<td>- Are you aware of any medications that you are taking that could cause diarrhea (e.g. antibiotics, warfarin)</td>
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<td>- Other healthcare providers</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Allergies</td>
<td><strong>Onset</strong></td>
<td><strong>Weight</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Take current weight and compare to pre – treatment or last recorded weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consider Contributing Factors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Proving / Palliating</strong></td>
<td><strong>Hydration Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cancer diagnosis and treatment(s) – note type and date of last treatment</td>
<td>- What brings on the diarrhea?</td>
<td>- Assess skin turgor, capillary refill, mucous membranes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Medical history</td>
<td>- Anything that makes the diarrhea better? Worse?</td>
<td>- Amount and character of urine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Medication profile (e.g. warfarin, antibiotics)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Recent lab or diagnostic reports (if patient is on warfarin consider increasing frequency of INR monitoring)</td>
<td><strong>Quality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Abdominal Assessment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Describe your last bowel movement</td>
<td>- Auscultate abdomen - assess presence and quality of bowel sounds</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Assess for abdominal pain, tenderness, distention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Was there any blood or mucous?</td>
<td><strong>Stool Examination</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Was it loose or watery?</td>
<td>- Inspect stool for colour (visible blood or mucous), consistency, volume, and odour</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Can you estimate the amount, large or small volume?</td>
<td><strong>Skin Integrity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Can you describe the odour?</td>
<td>- Assess perineal or peristomal skin integrity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Note any areas of erythema, edema, exudates, bleeding or skin breakdown</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Region / Radiation- N/A</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mental Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Severity / Other Symptoms</strong></td>
<td>- Assess for confusion, alterations in level of consciousness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How bothered are you by this symptom? (on a scale of 0 – 10, with 0 being not at all to 10 being the worst)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Understanding / Impact on You
- Is your diarrhea interfering with your normal daily activity (ADLs)?

**Value** - What do you believe is causing your diarrhea?

### DIARRHEA GRADING SCALE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE 1 (Mild)</th>
<th>GRADE 2 (Moderate)</th>
<th>GRADE 3 (Severe)</th>
<th>GRADE 4 (Life-threatening)</th>
<th>GRADE 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase of &lt;4 stools per day over baseline; mild increase in ostomy output compared to baseline</td>
<td>Increase of 4 - 6 stools per day over baseline; moderate increase in ostomy output compared to baseline</td>
<td>Increase of &gt;=7 stools per day over baseline; Incontinence; hospitalization indicated; severe increase in ostomy output compared to baseline; limiting self-care ADL (e.g. bathing, dressing, feeding self, using the toilet, taking medications)</td>
<td>Life-threatening consequences; urgent intervention indicated</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A semi-colon indicates ‘or’ within the description of the grade and a single dash (–) indicates a grade is not available

### Step-Up Approach to Symptom Management:

**Interventions Should Be Based On Current Grade Level and Include Lower Level Grade Interventions As Appropriate**

#### GRADE 1 (First 24 hours of onset)

**NON – URGENT:**

**Patient Care and Assessment**
- Collaborate with physician to rule out other causes or concomitant causes of diarrhea and to determine if further investigation warranted

**Dietary Management**
- **Encourage:**
  - 10-12 cups of fluids throughout the day
  - Low fat, low fiber diet (e.g. white rice and bread, applesauce)
  - Soluble fiber to help build stool consistency (e.g. fruits and vegetables without skins, oat bran, barley)
  - Small, frequent meals
- **Avoid:**
  - Spicy, fried foods
  - Insoluble fiber (e.g. skins of fruits and vegetables, wholegrain and multigrain foods)
  - Very hot or cold foods/fluids
  - Sorbitol-containing substances (e.g. sugar-free gums and candy)
  - Alcohol, caffeine

**Pharmacological Management**
- Avoid/discontinue any medications that may cause or exacerbate diarrhea (e.g. bulk laxatives, metoclopramide) in collaboration with physician and pharmacist
- If patient is taking warfarin, in collaboration with physician:

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Consider alternate anticoagulants such as dalteparin, or consider increasing frequency of INR monitoring.

- Instruct patient to start or continue loperamide according to package directions or as indicated by physician:
  - Start with 4 mg, followed by 2 mg every 4hr or after each unformed stool (Max daily dose: 16 mg, unless directed otherwise by physician)
  - Continue loperamide until 12hr diarrhea-free (or as otherwise advised by physician)
  - Patients with RT-induced diarrhea may continue loperamide for duration of treatment

*See special considerations for patients on Irinotecan below
* Corticosteroids (Refer to protocol specific algorithm if patient is on Immunotherapy – eg Ipilimumab)

### Skin Care Management
- Protect skin integrity and promote self care
- Cleanse perianal skin with warm water (+/- mild soap) after each stool, pat dry, do not rub
- Encourage sitz bath as tolerated with tepid water
- Moisture barrier creams prn

### Patient Education
- Record onset and number of loose stools per 24hr
- Reinforce:
  - That diarrhea can be effectively managed with prompt intervention
  - Importance of accurately reporting diarrhea
  - To seek immediate medical attention if:
    - T ≥ 38° C
    - Bloody stools
    - Severe cramping, acute abdominal pain (+/- nausea and vomiting)
    - Dizziness, weakness, confusion, excessive thirst, dark urine
    - Diarrhea not improving with recommended strategies
- Inform patient that isolation precautions may be required if symptoms worsen or infection suspected, patient may need to be isolated as per Infection Control Manual (available to BCCA internal staff only)

### Follow-Up
- Patients to be reassessed within 24hr. If symptoms not resolved, provide further recommended strategies, potential stool analysis and repeat follow – up assessment within 24hr
- Instruct patient/family to call back if symptoms worsen or do not improve
- If indicated, arrange for nurse initiated telephone follow – up or physician follow – up

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**Persistent GRADE 1- GRADE 2 Diarrhea NOT resolving after 24 hours (no fever, dehydration, neutropenia and/or blood in stool)**

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**URGENT:**

Requires medical attention within 24 hours

### Patient Care and Assessment
- Collaborate with physician:
  - To rule out other causes or concomitant causes of diarrhea or need for further assessment in outpatient setting
  - Refer to specific chemotherapy protocols for direction. See Chemotherapy Protocols in Resources Section
  - Lab tests that may be ordered:
    - Complete blood count (CBC), electrolyte profile, BUN/creatinine
    - Stool analysis – C. Difficile toxin assay, culture and sensitivity (Salmonella, E. Coli, Campylobacter, infectious colitis), ova and parasites, blood and leukocytes

### Dietary Management
- Consider trial of limiting lactose-containing products to see if symptoms improve
- If patient unable to tolerate adequate daily fluid intake, oral supplementation or IV hydration to replace lost fluid and electrolytes may be required

### Pharmacological
- Avoid/discontinue any medications that may cause or exacerbate diarrhea in collaboration

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**Management**

- Medications that may be prescribed:
  - Loperamide: may be continued at a higher dose or frequency (i.e. 2mg every 2hr), or discontinued and replaced by another medication
  - Corticosteroids (Refer to protocol specific algorithms if patient is on Immunotherapy)
  - Diphenoxylate-Atropine (Lomotil®)
  - Octreotide (subcutaneous)
  - Oral antibiotics (e.g. ciprofloxacin, metronidazole, vancomycin,* not generally recommended for RT-induced diarrhea

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**GRADE 3 or 4 diarrhea**

**OR**

Persistent Grade 1 or 2 diarrhea with one or more of the following symptoms: T ≥ 38° C, abdominal cramping, nausea and vomiting, sepsis, neutropenia, blood in stool, dehydration

**EMERGENT:**

Requires IMMEDIATE medical attention

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### Patient Care and Assessment

- Patients will generally require hospital admission. Notify physician of assessment, facilitate arrangements as necessary
- If patient is on Immunotherapy, remind patient to present Immunotherapy alert card
- Collaborate with physician:
  - To rule out other causes or concomitant causes of diarrhea
  - To hold chemotherapy until symptoms resolve. Chemotherapy may then be restarted at a reduced dose. Refer to specific chemotherapy protocols for direction.

**See Chemotherapy Protocols in Resources & Referrals Section below**

- Lab tests that may be ordered:
  - Complete blood count (CBC), electrolyte profile, BUN/creatinine
  - Stool analysis – C. Difficile toxin assay, culture and sensitivity (Salmonella, E. Coli, Campylobacter, infectious colitis), ova and parasites, blood and leukocytes
- Nursing Support:
  - Monitor vital signs as clinically indicated
  - Record intake and output and daily weight
  - Pain and symptom assessment and management as appropriate

### Dietary Management

- IV hydration to replace lost fluids and electrolytes
- Patients may require bowel rest and be NPO
- Enteral or parenteral nutrition (TPN) may be indicated

### Pharmacological Management

- Avoid/discontinue any medications that may cause or exacerbate diarrhea in collaboration with physician and pharmacist
- Medications that may be prescribed:
  - Octreotide (subcutaneous or IV)
  - Antibiotics (oral or intravenous route)
  - Systemic analgesia
  - Corticosteroids (Refer to protocol specific algorithm if patient on Immunotherapy – DO NOT administer corticosteroids if bowel perforation is suspected / confirmed)

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PATIENTS ON IRINOTECAN

**Early Onset Diarrhea**

- Occurs during or within 24hr of administration
- Is a cholinergic response that may be accompanied with other symptoms such as abdominal cramping, diaphoresis watery eyes, salivation, and rhinitis. Manage symptoms with Atropine.
- Instruct patient to contact healthcare providers (BCCA Nurse Telephone Line or Physician on call) to determine whether patient needs to come to cancer agency or go to emergency department for atropine treatment
- Prophylactic atropine may be indicated for subsequent treatments

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Late Onset/Delayed Diarrhea

- Occurs more than 24h after administration
- Can be prolonged and lead to potentially life-threatening dehydration and electrolyte imbalance if not proactively managed
- Must be treated immediately with high dose loperamide
- Patient Education:
  - Always keep supply of loperamide at home (available at pharmacy without a prescription)
  - Take two tablets (4mg) after 1st loose stool then one tablet (2mg) every 2hr until diarrhea-free for 12hr
  - Overnight may take 4mg every 4hr to allow longer sleep period
  - Loperamide daily dosage may exceed package recommendations. Reinforce importance of taking higher dosage to stop diarrhea
  - Contact healthcare providers (BCCA Nurse Telephone Line or Physician) if diarrhea does not improve within 24hr after starting loperamide or if diarrhea lasts more than 36hr (as antibiotics may be prescribed)

RESOURCES & REFFERALS

Referrals

- Patient support center or telephone care management
- Pain and Symptom Management/Palliative Care (PSMPC)
- Oncology Nutrition Services (Dietitian)
- Home Health Nursing

Management Guidelines

- BCCA Guidelines for Chemotherapy-Induced Diarrhea. Located in "Types of Cancer"
  

Patient Education

- Food Ideas to help Manage Diarrhea
  

Irinotecan Drug Index


Immunotherapy

- Immunotherapy Alert Card
- Please refer to protocol specific algorithms to guide management of immune mediated side effects.

Related Online Resources

- E.g. Fair Pharmacare; BC Palliative Benefits. Can be found in "Other Sources of Drug Funding Section"
  
  - [http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/pharmacy/drug-funding](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/pharmacy/drug-funding)

Bibliography List

- [http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/nursing/symptom-management](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/nursing/symptom-management)

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