

Diarrhea in adults

Diarrhea is defined as three or more loose or watery stools per day. It affects nearly every person at some point during their life, with the average adult experiencing it four times per year. Although most cases of diarrhea resolve within a few days without treatment, it's important to know when to seek help. We discuss the causes and treatments of sudden onset (acute) diarrhea in adults .

CAUSES

Diarrhea caused by infections usually results from eating or drinking contaminated food or water . Signs and symptoms of infection usually begin 12 hours to four days after exposure and resolve within three to seven days.

Diarrhea not related to an infection can occur as a side effect of antibiotics or other drugs, food allergies, gastrointestinal diseases such as inflammatory bowel disease, and other diseases.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The degree of illness associated with diarrhea varies from mild to severe. A person who has mild illness may have a few loose bowel movements but otherwise feels well. By contrast, a person with severe diarrhea may have 20 or more bowel movements per day, with defecation occurring up to every 20 or 30 minutes. In this situation, a significant amount of water and salts can be lost, seriously increasing the risk of dehydration. Diarrhea may be accompanied by fever (temperature greater than 38°C), abdominal pain, or cramping.

HOME CARE MEASURES

Drink adequate fluids

Most patients with acute diarrhea that is not severe can be treated at home by drinking extra fluids. The fluids should contain water, salt, and sugar. The fluids used for sweat replacement are not optimal, although they may be sufficient for a person with diarrhea who is not dehydrated and is otherwise healthy. Diluted fruit juices and flavored soft drinks along with saltine crackers and broths or soups may also be acceptable.

One way to judge hydration is by observing the color of the urine and how frequently the person urinates. A person who urinates infrequently or has urine that is dark yellow should drink more fluids. Normally, urine should be light yellow to nearly colorless. A person who is well hydrated normally passes urine every three to five hours.

If a person becomes dehydrated and is unable to take fluids by mouth, a rehydration solution can be given into a vein in a healthcare provider's office or the emergency department.

Diet

There is no particular food or group of foods that is best for a person with diarrhea. However, adequate nutrition is important during an episode of acute diarrhea. For patients without an appetite, it is acceptable to consume only liquids for a short period of time. Boiled starches and cereals (eg, potatoes, noodles, rice, wheat, and oats) with salt are recommended for patients with watery diarrhea; crackers, bananas, soup, and boiled vegetables may also be eaten.

Antidiarrheal medications

Medications to reduce diarrhea are available, and are safe if there is no fever and the stools are not bloody. These medications do not cure the cause of the diarrhea, but help to reduce the frequency of bowel movements.

- Loperamide
- Diphenoxylate
- **Bismuth**

Antibiotics

Antibiotics may be recommended in certain situations, such as in people with the following signs or symptoms:

- Moderate to severe traveler's diarrhea
- More than eight loose stools per day, dehydration, symptoms that continue for more than one week, a weakened immune system, and in those who require hospitalization

Preventing spread

Adults with diarrhea should be cautious to avoid spreading infection to family, friends, and co-workers. A person is considered contagious for as long as diarrhea continues. Microorganisms causing diarrhea are spread from hand to mouth; hand washing, care with diapering, and staying out of work or school are a few ways to prevent infecting family and other contacts. Hands should ideally be wet with water and plain or antibacterial soap and rubbed together for 15 to 30 seconds. Special attention should be paid to the fingernails, between the fingers, and the wrists. If a sink is not available, alcohol-based hand rubs are a good alternative for disinfecting hands.

PREVENTION

- Do not drink raw (unpasteurized) milk or foods that contain unpasteurized milk.
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Keep the refrigerator temperature at 40°F (4.4°C) or lower; the freezer at 0°F (-17.8°C) or lower.
- Use precooked, perishable, or ready-to-eat food as soon as possible.
- Keep raw meat, fish, and poultry separate from other food that will not be cooked and from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked food.
- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources to a safe internal temperature.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

- Profuse watery diarrhea with signs of dehydration. Early features of dehydration include sluggishness, becoming tired easily, dry mouth and tongue, thirst, muscle cramps, dark-colored urine, urinating infrequently, and dizziness or lightheadedness after standing or sitting up. More severe features include abdominal pain, chest pain, confusion, or difficulty remaining alert.
- Passage of many small stools containing blood and mucus
- Bloody or black diarrhea
- Temperature 38.5°C
- Passage of 6 unformed stools per 24 hours or illness that lasts more than 48 hours
- Severe abdominal pain