



### Diarrhea

Diarrhea is loose, watery stools. A person with diarrhea typically passes stool more than three times a day. People with diarrhea may pass more than a quart of stool a day. Acute diarrhea is a common problem that usually lasts 1 or 2 days and goes away on its own without special treatment. Prolonged diarrhea persisting for more than 2 days may be a sign of a more serious problem and poses the risk of dehydration. Chronic diarrhea may be a feature of a chronic disease.

Diarrhea can cause dehydration, which means the body lacks enough fluid to function properly. Dehydration is particularly dangerous in children and older people, and it must be treated promptly to avoid serious health problems.

People of all ages can get diarrhea and the average adult has a bout of acute diarrhea about four times a year.

### What causes diarrhea?

Acute diarrhea is usually related to a bacterial, viral, or parasitic infection. Chronic diarrhea is usually related to functional disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome or inflammatory bowel disease.

A few of the more common causes of diarrhea include the following:

- **Bacterial infections.** Several types of bacteria consumed through contaminated food or water can cause diarrhea. Common culprits include *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, and *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*).
- **Viral infections.** Many viruses cause diarrhea, including rotavirus, Norwalk virus, cytomegalovirus, herpes simplex virus, and viral hepatitis.
- **Food intolerances.** Some people are unable to digest food components such as artificial sweeteners and lactose—the sugar found in milk.
- **Parasites.** Parasites can enter the body through food or water and settle in the digestive system. Parasites that cause diarrhea include *Giardia lamblia*, *Entamoeba histolytica*, and *Cryptosporidium*.
- **Reaction to medicines.** Antibiotics, blood pressure medications, cancer drugs, and antacids containing magnesium can all cause diarrhea.
- **Intestinal diseases.** Inflammatory bowel disease, colitis, Crohn's disease, and celiac disease often lead to diarrhea.
- **Functional bowel disorders.** Diarrhea can be a symptom of irritable bowel syndrome.

### Dehydration

Diarrhea can cause dehydration, which means the body has lost too much fluid and too many electrolytes and can't function properly. Dehydration is particularly dangerous in children and in older adults and must be treated promptly to avoid serious health problems.

Signs of dehydration include

- thirst
- less frequent urination
- dry skin
- fatigue
- light-headedness
- dark-colored urine

### How is diarrhea treated?

In most cases of diarrhea, replacing lost fluid to prevent dehydration is the only treatment necessary. Medicines that stop diarrhea may be helpful, but they are not recommended for people whose diarrhea is caused by a bacterial infection or parasite. If you stop the diarrhea before having purged the bacteria or parasite, you will trap the organism in the intestines and prolong the problem. Rather, doctors usually prescribe antibiotics as a first-line treatment. Viral infections are either treated with medication or left to run their course, depending on the severity and type of virus.