

How to Manage Your Diarrhea



Symptom Management



**Cancer Care
Alberta**



This patient guide will help you understand:

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A What is cancer-related diarrhea?

It is a common side effect for people getting treatment for cancer.

Diarrhea:

- is loose, or watery bowel movements that might look loose and contain a large amount of water or liquid
- May contain undigested food
- Happens more than 3 or 4 times a day
- May cause an urgent need to go to the bathroom and you may not be able to stop yourself from having a bowel movement
- Can last for a few hours or become a problem that lasts a long time

You may:

- Get stomach cramps
- Feel bloated
- Feel restless
- Have sore skin around the rectal area from going to the bathroom a lot
- Get dehydrated from your body losing so much liquid

If you're dehydrated, you might:

- feel thirsty
- feel tired
- have a dry mouth and tongue
- have dark yellow urine or a need to pee less often than normal
- get dizzy when you stand up quickly, or have a headache



Are you on Checkpoint Inhibitors?

If the answer is yes, **do not follow the tips** in this book to manage your diarrhea.

Checkpoint Inhibitor can cause your bowels to become inflamed which can cause diarrhea. Your doctor may prescribe other medications to treat the diarrhea.

Instead:

- **Call your doctor** if you have diarrhea 3 times a day above your normal or if you have other symptoms like blood or mucous in your stool, or stomach pain.
- Go to your nearest emergency room if you do not feel well

Your oncology team will continue to monitor you until the diarrhea stops. It is important that if at any time you develop diarrhea you contact your doctor.

B What causes cancer-related diarrhea?

Many different things can cause diarrhea, including:

- Cancer treatments
- Infection
- Some natural health products and vitamins
- Eating foods high in fibre
- Other medical problems
- Some medications, like laxatives and antibiotics
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Eating foods that upset your stomach

C What can I do to manage my diarrhea?

1) Medications

- Take anti-diarrhea medication as directed by your healthcare team.
- If you take laxatives or stool softeners, you will probably be told to stop taking them while you have diarrhea.
- Some medications, like metoclopramide, domperidone and antacids with magnesium, may cause your diarrhea or make it worse. Stop taking them while you have diarrhea, unless your doctor has told you something different.
- Some herbal medicines and natural health products like saw palmetto, ginseng, milk thistle, plantago seed, and aloe may make your diarrhea worse. Always make sure you tell your healthcare team when you are taking herbal medications.





Be safe! To make sure a medication is safe for you to use:

- Check with your cancer care team before you take medication that has bismuth subsalicylate (like Pepto-Bismol®)
- Always follow your health care team's directions — they might be different than what is written on the box of medicine

2) Drink lots of fluids

Diarrhea can cause dehydration. Drinking more will not stop your diarrhea, but it will help make up for the fluids you lose.



Drink at least 9-12 cups (about 2-3 litres) of fluids each day.



Be safe!

- Talk to your healthcare team if you cannot drink 9-12 cups of fluids each day when you have diarrhea, unless you have been told to limit or restrict fluids.
- If your diarrhea is severe (more than 7 times a day) you may need to get fluids intravenously (through an IV) to keep you hydrated.

Tip!

- Drink an extra cup of fluid for every watery stool you have. Sports drinks are a good choice.
- Drink small amounts often during the day.
- Drink fluids slowly.
- Warm or room temperature fluids may be easier to drink.
- If you want to drink juice, dilute it with water — mix half juice and half water.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine like coffee, black tea, and pop.
- If you are lactose intolerant, limit dairy to what you can tolerate.

Sugar substitutes may make gas and diarrhea worse. When you have diarrhea, try not to drink or eat things with these sweeteners like chewing gum, candy, cough drops, or "diet drinks". If your medication has a sugar substitute, do not stop taking it. Instead, speak with your doctor or pharmacist about getting something different.

3) Change your diet



- Eat many small meals and snacks instead of 2 or 3 large meals
- Eat foods with less fibre
- Eat slowly, take small bites, and chew food well
- Choose low fibre foods and avoid skins, peels, seeds, and bran



Ask your healthcare team to refer you to a registered dietitian. A dietitian can help you find ways to eat and drink well when you have diarrhea.

You can eat your usual diet once you:

Tip!

- have not had diarrhea for about 12 hours
- do not have to take medications to stop your diarrhea.

Slowly add foods back into your diet so you don't upset your stomach.

Drinks to help ease diarrhea:



- Water, clear juice, ice chips, or popsicles
- Flat, non-fizzy, and without caffeine
- Broth, strained clear soup
- Jello®
- Ask your healthcare team about oral rehydration solutions (a mix of water, salt and sugar that keeps you hydrated)
- Drinks with electrolytes like sports drinks

Drinks you should limit:

- Caffeine
- Prune juice, fruit juice with pulp
- Pop and fizzy drinks
- Alcohol
- Limit milk and dairy products if they make your diarrhea worse

Foods to help ease diarrhea:



- Peeled pears, apples, apricots, bananas
- Canned fruit like applesauce and peaches (with the juice drained)
- Vegetables like cooked and peeled squash, carrots, potatoes, sweet potatoes and turnips
- Breads (white bread and rye bread), barley and low fibre cereals like oatmeal, cold rice cereal, pasta, white rice and tapioca
- Protein from foods like eggs, meat, chicken, yogurt and smooth peanut butter

Foods you should limit:

- Dried and seedy fruits, like prunes, raisins and berries
- Whole nuts and seeds
- Spicy foods
- Corn, broccoli, chickpeas, lentils, beans, cabbage, onion, and garlic
- Greasy and fried meats, eggs, sausage, bacon and salami
- Whole wheat breads, high fibre cereals and grains
- Brown rice, wild rice, quinoa
- Raw vegetables and unpeeled fresh fruits
- Gravy and rich sauces
- Sweets and heavy desserts

4) Plan for outings

Sometimes diarrhea can cause an urgent need to get to a bathroom. Plan ahead so you can feel more comfortable leaving home.

- Find the nearest bathroom **before you need it** when you go out.
- Bring a change of clothes in case of an accident.
- Wear absorbent, throw-away underwear if you think you might have an accident.

5) Take care of your skin

When you have diarrhea, the skin around the rectal area can get damaged and be painful. To avoid infection or feeling uncomfortable, use these tips to take care of your skin:



Watch for signs of infection

- It is normal for tender skin to leak liquid as it heals. Clear, white liquid and blood streaks or specks are common and normal.
- Tell your health care team if your skin is painful, swollen, bleeding a lot or you notice it leaking liquids that **are not** clear or white.



Ointments and creams

- Your healthcare team may give you ointment or cream to protect open skin and prevent infections.
- Over-the-counter creams and ointments with zinc oxide may help protect and heal the skin.
- Do not use things like perfume, talcum powder or dressing tape on broken skin.



Take a sitz bath

A sitz bath is a warm, soothing soak for the area of the rectum. You can use your bathtub, a large basin or a plastic sitz bath that fits over a toilet seat. You can buy these at a drug store.

How a sitz bath helps:

- Cleans your skin
- Lowers the chance of infection
- Soothes your skin and makes it feel better
- Helps get blood flowing to the area to speed up healing

Tips for your sitz bath:

- Add 1-2 tablespoons of baking soda or 1-2 teaspoons of salt to the water.
- Always check the temperature of the water to make sure it is not too warm.
- Soak your bottom for about 10-15 minutes each time.
- Have as many sitz baths as you like to stay comfortable.
- Do not add bath oils or anything else to the water.



6) Other things to do if your skin is still sore:

- Leave the sore area open to the air as much as possible.
- Wear cotton underwear with no elastic around the leg holes. Large boxer shorts are great for both men and women.

- If urine splashes on sore skin, try sitting a different way on the toilet. Use a squeeze bottle filled with warm water to clean the area after you pee. Pat the area dry.
- Do not use things like perfume, talcum powder or dressing tape on broken skin.

D When should I talk to my healthcare team?

Call your healthcare team right away or go to your nearest emergency centre if you:



- Have diarrhea (4 - 7 more times than your normal) that continues for over 24 hours, even after you have tried anti-diarrhea medication
- Have a fever of 38.3°C (100.9°F) or higher at any time or 38.0°C (100.4°F) to 38.2°C (100.8°F) for at least 1 hour
- Have blood in your stool, or dark tarry stools
- Feel tired, weak or dizzy
- Have chest pains or severe cramps in your stomach
- Are vomiting (unable to keep anything down orally)
- Have little or very dark pee
- Are unable to eat or you are afraid to eat

Check with your healthcare team to see if there are any other special instructions you need to follow for your specific medications.



If you have any symptoms that are not normal for you, please let your healthcare team know.

Your questions and concerns are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

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The information is to be updated every 3 years, or as new clinical evidence emerges. If there are any concerns or updates with this information, please email cancerpatienteducation@ahs.ca.

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