



## Understanding **DIARRHEA**

### *Overview*

People suffering from diarrhea experience frequent, loose, watery stools. This disorder can affect people of all ages but is particularly worrisome in the young and old because of the threat of dehydration. Diarrhea lasting for more than 2 days may be a sign of a more serious problem.

Physicians talk about two types of diarrhea. Acute diarrhea can be caused by bacterial, viral, or parasitic infections, food intolerance, or reactions to medicine and lasts a short time. Chronic diarrhea is usually related to other digestive disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome or inflammatory bowel disease and may last for the duration of the illness. Diarrhea can be a symptom of intestinal infection, celiac disease or lactose intolerance.

People who visit foreign countries are at risk for traveler's diarrhea, which is caused by eating food or drinking water contaminated with bacteria, viruses, or parasites. Traveler's diarrhea can be a problem for people visiting developing countries.

Research funding for diarrhea is very low in spite of the high mortality rates. Each year, 4.5 billion people contract diarrhea worldwide. In Canada, 86% of acute gastrointestinal illnesses involve diarrhea and approximately 25% of people taking antibiotic medicines develop diarrhea. Over-the-counter retail sales for diarrhea remedies doubled between 2003 and 2008 to equal \$50 million in 2008.

### *Symptoms*

Diarrhea may be accompanied by cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, nausea, or an urgent need to use the bathroom. Sometimes diarrhea may be accompanied by fever or bloody stools and/or severe pain in the abdominal or rectum. If you experience these symptoms or dehydration, you need to see your doctor.

Signs of dehydration that accompany diarrhea may include thirst, infrequent urination, dark-colored urine, dry skin, fatigue, light-headedness. If you have a child with diarrhea, watch carefully for additional indicators of dehydration which may include dry mouth, tearless crying, dry diapers, sunken abdomen, eyes, or cheeks. A child can die from dehydration within a few days so it is very important to contact your doctor immediately if you child has diarrhea for more than a day.

### *Tests & Diagnosis*

Often diagnosis is based on questions your doctor asks about your eating habits, recent use of medications, recent travel experiences and physical examination.

**Stool cultures** can be analyzed in a laboratory to check for bacteria, parasites, or other signs of disease and infection.

**Blood tests** help rule out certain diseases.

# DIARRHEA

**Food intolerances or allergies** may be the cause of your diarrhea. Your doctor may ask you to avoid lactose, carbohydrates, wheat, or other foods. If your diarrhea stops when these items are removed from your diet, curing your diarrhea may involve changing your diet.

If the cause of your diarrhea is not easily determined and it does not resolve itself, your doctor may send you for a sigmoidoscopy, colonoscopy or imaging tests to have a look at your digestive tract from the inside.

## *How is diarrhea treated?*

In most cases of diarrhea, replacing lost fluid to prevent dehydration is the only treatment necessary.

Fluid and electrolytes that help our bodies function are lost when we have diarrhea. These need to be replaced quickly. Water does not contain electrolytes. Broth and soups that contain sodium, and fruit juices, soft fruits, or vegetables that contain potassium, help restore electrolyte levels. Over-the-counter rehydration solutions such as Pedialyte, Ceralyte, and Infalyte are also good electrolyte sources, especially for children.

Medicines that stop diarrhea may be helpful, but they are unlikely to resolve the problem if your diarrhea is caused by a bacterial infection or parasite. In these cases, doctors usually prescribe antibiotics. If a viral infection is the cause of your diarrhea, you may or may not be treated with medication depending on the severity of the infection and type of virus.

Trying a bulking agent such as psyllium may be helpful. Bulking agents help hold water in the stool and add bulk which may slow your bowel movements down. Don't be confused by labels that say bulking agents are for constipation. These products can be helpful for both diarrhea and constipation.

You may also try to avoid foods that have a tendency to aggravate your diarrhea. These include caffeine, milk products, and foods that are greasy, high in fiber and very sweet.

If the diarrhea occurs intermittently, keep a diary. Monitor the foods you eat and the reactions your body has. This may help identify a food intolerance or celiac disease which would explain your diarrhea and allow you to make a decision to change your diet and relieve your diarrhea.

It is important to remember that if you have diarrhea for several days or develop a new onset of diarrhea, fever or severe abdominal pain, you should see your doctor.

## *More information*

For more information about protecting and enhancing your digestive health, please visit [www.CDHF.ca](http://www.CDHF.ca)

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- Please send me information about protecting and improving my digestive health.

Over 20 million Canadians suffer from digestive disorders every year. The Canadian Digestive Health Foundation believes this is unnecessary and unacceptable.

We reduce suffering and improve quality of life by empowering Canadians with trusted, up to date, science-based information about digestive health and disease.

As the Foundation of the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology, we work directly with leading physicians, scientists, and other health care professionals to help you understand and take control of your digestive health with confidence and optimism.

Through research and public education, we aim to:

**↓ REDUCE**  
the incidence and prevalence of digestive disorders

**↑ IMPROVE**  
understanding of digestive health issues

**♥ SUPPORT**  
those suffering from digestive disorders

**+ ENHANCE**  
quality of life for those living with digestive disorders

## Request for support

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## Contact us/Donate to

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