

DIARRHEA AND CHEMOTHERAPY

Diarrhea is passing bowel motions more often than usual. The motions can often be soft or watery. Some cancer treatments can cause diarrhoea. These include some chemotherapy drugs, some targeted anti-cancer treatments, and radiotherapy to the abdominal or pelvic areas.

Why does it happen?

Cancer treatments can damage the lining of your gut. This reduces the amount of water and nutrients (food) that can move from the gut into the body.

The extra water in the gut causes loose or watery bowel motions (diarrhoea).

Why is diarrhoea a problem?

When you have diarrhoea you lose water or fluids (liquids) from your body. If you have severe diarrhoea, you can lose a lot of fluids. This is called dehydration.

Signs of dehydration are:

- you feel light headed or dizzy or confused
- your heart feels as if it is skipping or going very fast
- you have a severe headache
- your urine (wee) changes, e.g. you don't pass as much as usual, or it is a very dark colour

What can I take?

There are medicines you can take that can stop or reduce diarrhoea.

Your doctor or nurse will advise you about which medicines are suitable for you and when to take them. It is important to follow the directions for taking these medicines very carefully.

If you usually take medicine to keep your bowel motions regular, stop taking this when diarrhoea starts. Ask your doctor when to start taking this medicine again after the diarrhoea has stopped.

Important

Contact your doctor or nurse immediately if you have:

- a temperature of 38°C or higher
- uncontrolled diarrhoea even after taking anti-diarrhoea medication
- blood in your bowel motions
- severe stomach pains and bloating
- sudden or new vomiting
- signs of dehydration

If you can't contact your doctor or nurse, go to the nearest hospital emergency department for help.



Some drugs can cause very severe diarrhoea

These include:

- the chemotherapy drugs, capecitabine and irinotecan
- the targeted anti-cancer treatment, ipilimumab

If you are being treated with one of these drugs and you get diarrhoea, contact your doctor or nurse immediately, or go to your nearest hospital emergency department.

What else can I do for diarrhoea?

Drink more liquids each day

- Try to drink about 8 glasses of liquids throughout the day, e.g., water, diluted soft drinks, weak cordial, clear broth.
- If you are 'fluid restricted' check with your doctor how much fluid you can drink.
- Drinking won't stop the diarrhoea but it will help to replace the fluids you are losing and prevent problems caused by dehydration.

Try to eat...

- small meals – try 5 or 6 small meals each day, instead of 3 big meals
- foods that are easy to digest such as: bananas, canned or stewed fruit, boiled potatoes without the skin, rice and pasta, white bread, well-cooked oats, steamed chicken without the skin, white fish, eggs or jelly.

Try NOT to eat....

- foods that are fatty, fried or spicy
- milk and dairy products – lactose free milk may be okay
- drinks with caffeine or alcohol.
- raw fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes and cereals (e.g., cabbage and cauliflower may produce wind and cause cramping).

Adapted from: <https://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers/patient-information-sheets/managing-side-effects/3088-managing-the-side-effects-of-chemotherapy>

Common questions

What can I do if my bottom (rectal area) or stoma becomes sore?

- Use a baby wipe that is alcohol free and unscented to clean the area
- It may help to sit in a shallow warm bath with a little salt added
- Ask your doctor or nurse about creams that can help relieve redness and pain
- Let your doctor or nurse know if your bottom or stoma is sore or bleeds (becomes excoriated)

What things do I need to tell my doctor or nurse if diarrhoea becomes a problem?

If you get diarrhoea tell your doctor or nurse:

- how often your bowel motions occur each day
- what medicines you've taken and when
- whether they worked
- how much fluid you have been drinking

It may be helpful to keep a diary as sometimes it can be difficult to remember everything when you are feeling unwell.