

Managing Your Diarrhea

This handout will give you information on what to do if you have diarrhea. Your nurse may give you other information on the medication prescribed for your diarrhea.

What is diarrhea?

An increase in the number of loose or watery stools (bowel movements) you have in 24 hours. You may also have cramps or pain and bloating (swelling) in your abdomen.

Your diarrhea may be caused by:

- Your cancer or another disease you may have
- Systemic therapy
- Radiation therapy
- Medications
- Constipation
- An infection
- Some nutritional supplements

Your diarrhea may have more than one cause.

What you can do if you have diarrhea

- It is important to drink fluids. This can be water, fruit juice that has been diluted with water, soup or sports drinks.
- Drink less fluids with caffeine or lactose (a sugar found in milk products) in them.
- Drink less fruit drinks and sodas (carbonated pop). Add water to your fruit juices.
- Eat small meals a number of times during the day.
- Eat less spicy or fried foods.
- Eat less foods that your body cannot easily digest (for example: wheat bran, nuts, seeds, dark, leafy vegetables, dried peas or the skins from fruits or vegetables).
- Eat foods that your body can easily digest (barley, potatoes, bananas and applesauce).
- Do not chew gum or eat candy that has sorbitol in it (sugar free gum or sugar free candy).
- You may need to stop any laxatives or stools softeners that you may be taking. Talk to your doctor or nurse before starting them again.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your appetite or diet, please ask any member of your health care team to refer you to a dietitian.
- If you have pain or soreness in your rectal area from the diarrhea, a sitz bath can help. You can use your bathtub or a plastic sitz bath basin that you can buy at most pharmacies (it will fit into your toilet). If you use your bathtub, clean and rinse it out before and after you use it. Fill your bathtub with about 15 centimeters (6 inches) of warm water. Add ½ cup of baking soda or salt to the water. Stir the water until the baking soda or salt is dissolved. Sit down into the water. Soak in the tub until the water cools. Air-dry the area or gently pat yourself dry with a lint free towel. If you buy a sitz bath, put 2 teaspoons of salt or baking soda and 1 litre (4 cups) of warm water in it. Sit in this for about 10 minutes or until the water becomes cool.

- Ask your nurse or doctor about a cream to help with soreness in your rectal area.
- When you have a bath or shower, use a mild soap to wash your rectal area.

When you leave your home, you may want to:

- Take a change of clothes with you.
- Know where bathrooms are.
- Use absorbent padding in your underwear.

Your doctor may prescribe a medication to help stop your diarrhea. It is important you take this medication as prescribed for you. If you have any questions about this medication, talk to your doctor or nurse.

Call to talk to a nurse if you:

- Have more than 6 to 8 loose or watery stools in 24 to 48 hours.
 - Have right upper abdominal pain.
 - See blood in your stool or your stool looks black in colour.
 - Notice your urine becoming dark yellow in colour.
1. Call your primary nurse at the cancer centre from Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 4 pm, (except on holidays). Use the phone number your primary nurse gave you.
 2. Contact CareChart Digital Health from Monday to Friday, 5 pm to 8:30 am and anytime on weekends and holidays for symptom management support.

Talk to a nurse using one of these options:

- Call the after-hours telephone line at 1-877-681-3057.
- Request a video call by going to www.carechart.ca.
- Use the CareChart Digital Health App. This App is available to download for iOS or Android devices.

Go to the emergency department at the hospital closest to you if you:

- Have more than two of the symptoms above at the same time
- Have a fever above 38.3° C/100.9°F at any time or above 38.0° C/100.4°F for more than an hour
- Are vomiting and unable to keep liquids down
- You become dizzy and are unable to stand

Talk to any member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any of the information in this handout. For more information about how you can manage your symptoms, go to Ontario Health - Cancer Care Ontario's website found at: www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms.

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