

Patient & Family Guide

2026

Information for Patients Receiving Radiation Therapy: Diarrhea

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What is diarrhea?

You will know that you have diarrhea if your bowel movements become watery and more often. You may have gas and cramps before you have diarrhea. The bowel movements may become difficult to control.

Who gets diarrhea and how can I tell I have it?

Diarrhea is a common side effect when radiation treatment is given to the pelvis. When your bowel is in the area being treated with radiation, the lining of the bowel can become irritated. This irritation may cause cramping pains in the abdomen, increased gas and/or changes in your bowel movements.

When will I get diarrhea?

Each person reacts differently to treatment. Most people experience problems with diarrhea a few weeks into treatment. If you are having a short course of treatment, the diarrhea may start after your treatments are over.

What should I do if I think I have diarrhea?

Tell a member of your radiation team if you have any changes in your bowel habits. They may recommend a change in your diet or a change in your medication.

How should I change my diet if I have diarrhea?

Once you **know** you have diarrhea you should:

- Try to eat four to six small meals a day rather than a few large ones.
- Choose foods low in fibre. Avoid high fibre foods like whole grain breads and high fibre cereals with bran, nuts and seeds. Peel fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid foods that cause gas and cramping (see list). To reduce gas, avoid using straws or chewing gum.
- Avoid high fat foods, like deep-fried foods and cream sauces.
- Avoid caffeinated beverages.
- You may need to limit your intake of some dairy products (like milk and ice cream) or use treated milk such as “Lacteeze”™. Foods like yogurt and hard cheeses are better tolerated.
- Once diarrhea has improved, slowly return to your normal diet.

Foods to be avoided with diarrhea	Foods to choose if you have diarrhea
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bran, whole grain foods • Whole grain cereals • Raw fruits and vegetables • Fatty, greasy foods • Spicy foods • Dried fruits (raisins, prunes) • Alcoholic beverages • Nuts, seeds, and popcorn • Milk and milk products • Chocolate • All gas forming foods: Hard cooked eggs, coffee, beans, lentils, cabbage, green pepper, onion, turnip, brussel sprouts, cauliflower, raw apples, cantaloupe, honey dew melon, watermelon, chewing gum. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plain fish, chicken, and meat • Soft cooked eggs • Yogurt • Potatoes • White rice or pasta • Applesauce or canned fruit • Bananas • Pulp free juices • White bread, bagels, crackers • Cereal such as Cheerios, Special K, Rice Krispies, Cream of Wheat, oatmeal, barley • Treated milk (“Lacteeze”)™ • Well cooked, low fibre vegetables (carrots, beets, peas, squash)

What else can I do to help?

Following these tips may help you cope with diarrhea:

- Drink plenty of fluids (8-10 glasses of water a day) to help replace the fluids you lost with the diarrhea.
 - › If you have a hard time drinking water, try cranberry juice, flat decaffeinated pop, weak tea, chicken broth, consommé or sport drinks such as an oral rehydration solution (see appendix on page 3).
- Try to drink 1 cup of fluid for every watery bowel movement you have. It may help to sip on liquids slowly.
- After every bowel movement, wipe your bottom with a clean, moist cloth. Do not use baby wipes. Toilet paper may become too harsh.
- The skin around the anus can become reddened. To help ease the discomfort, most people find that soaking in warm water is helpful.
 - › A sitz bath is used to soak the skin in your pelvis and groin area. It can be done in your bathtub, or on your toilet using a plastic sitz bath pan. You can buy a toilet sitz bath pan at a drugstore.
 - › Choose the method that allows you to fully soak the affected area. You can take a sitz bath as many times as you need to feel comfortable. We recommend 3 to 4 times a day. You can take a sitz bath after each bowel movement if your anal area is sore. Sit and soak your buttocks for 10 to 15 minutes.

Note: if you are using the bathtub, use a piece of foam to raise your buttocks off the bottom of the tub. This will help expose the affected area to the bath water.

What should I do if I see blood in my bowel movements?

Speak with a healthcare provider if you notice blood in your bowel movements.

What should I do if I frequently feel an urge to move my bowels but I only pass small amounts of stool or mucous?

You might have radiation-related proctitis. This is a common side-effect of pelvic radiation. The lower part of the bowel becomes irritated from treatment. It usually resolves a few weeks after completing treatment. Talk to your Health Care Provider if this is bothersome as there could be medications that will help.

Questions you may want to ask Your Health Care Team

- Is my treatment likely to cause diarrhea?
- What can I do to make the symptoms better?
- Should I alter my diet when I start my treatment?
- Is there a medication that will help with the diarrhea?

Appendix

You can buy Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) products (like Gastrolyte® or Pedialyte ®) from most drugstores, or you can make your own using the recipes below.

- Try to sip on an ORS throughout the day instead of other liquids (like water or juice).
- Try to drink at least 1 L (4 cups) of an ORS as part of your daily liquids.

ORS Recipes

Combine all ingredients and mix until dissolved (no longer cloudy).

Sugar and salt water

3/4 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons sugar

4 cups water

Calorie-free flavouring (like Crystal light®) to taste

Regular Gatorade™ drink

1½ cups Gatorade™

2½ cups water

¾ teaspoon salt

Gatorade™ G2® (half the sugar and calories of regular Gatorade™)

591 millilitre bottle Gatorade™ G2®

1/3 teaspoon salt

Tomato juice

2½ cups tomato juice

1½ cups water

Broth

2 cups liquid broth (like chicken, beef, or vegetable), not low salt

2 cups water

2 tablespoons sugar

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We would like to invite you to send any comments or suggestions on how to improve this booklet to education.cancercare@nshealth.ca or feel free to call us at 1-866-599-2267.

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If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.