

Information for Patients Receiving Radiation Therapy: Diarrhea

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What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is an increase in the number and looseness of your bowel movements. You may have gas and cramps before you have diarrhea. You will know that you have diarrhea if your bowel movements become loose, even watery, and more frequent. 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 and increased gas.

When will I get diarrhea?

Each person reacts differently to treatment. Most people experience problems with diarrhea about 10 to 15 days after the start of treatment. If you are having a short course of treatment, the diarrhea may start after your treatments are over. For a treatment of 3 weeks or longer, diet changes and medication may have to be used during treatment and for a few weeks after.

What should I do if I think I have diarrhea?

Do not change your diet or eating habits until (or if) you get diarrhea. Your doctor will often prescribe a medication to help control the diarrhea. Tell a member of your radiation team if you notice any change in your bowel habits. A change to your diet is often the first step.

**What are your questions? Please ask.
We are here to help you.**

How should I change my diet if I have diarrhea?

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

- Try to eat four to six 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 is improved, slowly reintroduce foods and return to your normal diet.

Foods to be avoided with diarrhea

- 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.

Foods to choose if you have diarrhea

- 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 few tips, along with changing your diet and getting some medication, 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 Gatorade™.
- Try to drink 1 cup of fluid for every loose bowel movement you have. It may help to sip on liquids slowly.
- After every bowel movement, clean your bottom with a moist cloth. Toilet paper may become too harsh.
- If you have hemorrhoids, they may become inflamed. The doctor may prescribe a cream or suppository that will help with discomfort. The skin around the anus can also become reddened. To help ease the discomfort, most people find that soaking in warm water helps greatly. You can do this by filling up the tub with a few inches of warm water and soak your “bottom” for about 5 minutes. Or you can use a special sitz bath pan that fits under the toilet seat. Fill the pan with a few inches of warm water, and soak in the water for relief. Take sitz baths as often as you feel the need (sometimes up to 4 or 5 times a day). Pat the area dry with a soft towel or cloth.

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?

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