

Chemotherapy can damage healthy cells such as those that line the interior of the digestive tract. This can result in a disruption of the fluid balance that these cells maintain. Specifically, absorption of fluid from the gastrointestinal (GI) tract back into the body is decreased, and secretion of fluid and electrolytes in the stool is increased. This causes watery bowel movements, otherwise known as diarrhea.

## The challenge of managing diarrhea

Diarrhea not only is an inconvenient side effect of cancer treatment, but also can be life-threatening if not adequately managed. It may lead to:

- Dehydration (a condition caused by the loss of too much water from the body).
- Electrolyte imbalance (having too many or too few electrolytes in your body, which can keep your organs from functioning properly).
- Malnutrition due to reduced absorption of nutrients (not getting enough calories or nutrients such as vitamins and minerals).
- Inflammation, pain, or bleeding as a results of increased bowel movements.

At its extreme, diarrhea can cause the critical electrolytes sodium and potassium to reach low levels.

## Factors that make diarrhea worse

Some factors may make chemotherapy-related diarrhea worse:

- Damage to the intestines as a result of surgery or radiation may make the GI system more susceptible to irritation.
- Other medications (such as antibiotics), and some medical conditions. Talk to your doctor about how your medical condition may make diarrhea worse.

## Managing diarrhea

Diarrhea can be addressed in different ways:

### Diet

Several changes in your diet will help reduce the discomfort of diarrhea:

- Avoid foods that irritate the GI system, such as greasy, spicy, or fried foods.
- Avoid milk and dairy products because diarrhea may lead to a loss of the enzyme lactase, which breaks down lactose, the sugar found in milk, resulting in temporary lactose-intolerance.
- Because of their high-fiber content, vegetables tend to be difficult to digest and should be avoided during episodes of diarrhea. Cruciferous vegetables, such as cabbage, Brussel sprouts, and broccoli, can be particularly problematic.

Your diet should be limited to simple, easy-to-digest foods, and then be expanded as the diarrhea begins to subside.

# Managing Diarrhea



A diet consisting of bananas, rice, applesauce, toast (called the BRAT diet), and clear liquid is a good starting point. Eventually, you can add pasta without sauce, white-meat chicken without skin, scrambled eggs, and other easily digested foods, as tolerated.

## Fluids

Staying hydrated (giving your body plenty of liquids) is very important in the management of diarrhea. You must consume enough clear liquids to make up for the volume of fluids lost due to the diarrhea. This amount is in addition to your usual daily intake.

- You may need to take in three to four liters or more of fluid per day.
- In addition to plain water, you should include fluids and contain some sugar and salt, such as broth or Gatorade®. Replacement of fluids with plain water alone can lead to low levels of salt or calcium in the blood. These can be life-threatening conditions.

Talk to your doctor about other ways to manage diarrhea.

## Drug Therapy

**Imodium**, sold over-the-counter as loperamide 2 mg tablets

- Take 2 tablets with first loose stool then 1 additional tablet as needed with each additional loose stool (max of 8 tablets/24 hours)
- If Imodium is not effective after 2 days, call your health care provider.