

Diarrhea During or After Cancer Treatment

What causes diarrhea?

There are some cancer treatments that are likely to cause diarrhea. Diarrhea may be worse if you have:

- More than one cancer treatment such as both radiation and chemotherapy
- Graft vs. Host Disease (GVHD)
- A history of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)
- Recent or current treatment with antibiotics

Diarrhea is defined as having more than two loose or watery stools a day. Diarrhea can lead to poor appetite, fatigue, weakness, dehydration, and weight loss. This can affect your ability to get through treatment. Left untreated, diarrhea can also prevent the absorption of many nutrients from your diet leading to deficiencies.

What can I do?

- **Eat small, frequent meals:** Instead of 3 meals a day, try eating smaller amounts of food and adding snacks between meals. Aim for 5-6 small meals/snacks a day. Take time to chew and eat slowly. Digestion starts in your mouth!
- **Drink plenty of fluids to avoid becoming dehydrated:** Diarrhea can leave our bodies depleted of electrolytes including sodium, potassium, calcium and phosphorus. You can add these back into your body by including drinks such as coconut water, chicken or vegetable broth, juices (not apple or grape), rice milk, or one of the electrolyte replacement drinks listed at the end of this handout. Check with your dietitian about commercially prepared electrolyte enhanced drinks that may be appropriate for you.



Drinking coconut water (shown in this image) restores electrolytes

My fluid goal: _____ ml (_____ oz)/daily

What can I do? (continued)

- **Probiotics:** Include daily food sources of probiotics, which are good sources of healthy bacteria for the gut. These are especially important if you have been on antibiotics recently. Examples include plain yogurt, kefir, and buttermilk. If you are immunosuppressed, discuss the best sources for you with a dietitian.
- **Limit these foods:**
 - Spicy foods, such as curries and hot peppers
 - Fatty foods, such as French fries, pizza, fried chicken, gravies and chowders
 - Foods that produce gas, such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, onions, beans and garlic
 - Caffeine and alcohol such as coffee, caffeinated tea, chocolate, wine
 - Sugar alcohols found in cookies, candy, gum, beverages and some protein bars. Read labels and avoid ingredients such as sorbitol, mannitol and/or xylitol.
 - Temperature matters! Very hot or very cold foods can make symptoms worse. Let foods cool to room temperature before eating or drinking.

What about fiber?

Avoid products that have more than two grams of fiber per serving while you have diarrhea. When diarrhea resolves, slowly introduce more fiber. Fiber is the undigested part of a plant. There are two main types of fiber: insoluble and soluble. Most plant foods contain a combination of both.

- **Insoluble fiber** moves bulk through our stomach and intestines more quickly. Limit this type of fiber with diarrhea. Examples include seeds and skins of fruit.
- **Soluble fiber** slows digestions by absorbing water in the intestines. Some examples of food with soluble fiber include oatmeal, rice, carrots, bananas and beets.

Lactose

Milk or milk products may be hard to digest after some types of chemotherapy or radiation to the lower stomach. Milk contains a sugar called lactose. If lactose is not digested, it can cause cramping, gas or diarrhea. There are many brands of lactose free milks available in grocery stores. Some dairy products, such as cheese and yogurt, have low levels of lactose.

Food recommendations for diarrhea

Try these	Limit these
Protein	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lactose reduced milk (Lactaid 100®) • Yogurt with “live cultures” • Soy milk/ice cream, rice milk/ice cream, coconut milk/ice cream, almond milk/ice cream • Aged cheese (cheddar, Swiss, mozzarella) • Soy cheese • Lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs • Peanut butter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular milk: whole, 2%, 1%, nonfat • Homemade yogurt • High fat dairy: ice cream, whole milk cottage, cream cheese, whipped cream, half & half • Processed meats, hot dogs, bacon, sausage • Fried meats, chicken, fish • Lentils, beans, nuts, seeds
Grains	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grains or cereals with less than 2 grams fiber per serving (white rice, pasta, white breads, plain bagels or crackers), flour tortillas • Oatmeal, barley (cooked) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grains or cereals with more than 2 grams of fiber per serving (whole wheat bread, whole grain bread, brown or wild rice, whole grain pasta, wheat and corn bran, bulgur) • Popcorn • Crackers or bagels with seeds
Vegetables and fruit	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrots, beets, mushrooms, chestnuts, yams, potatoes, sweet potatoes, rutabagas, parsnips, squash, pumpkin without peel • Avocados, bananas, applesauce, mangos, papayas, fresh peaches, pears or apples without peel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green beans, bell peppers, corn, eggplant, cucumber, tomatoes, celery, onions, shallots, leeks, garlic, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, sprouts, lettuce and dark leafy greens, peas • Melon, citrus fruits: (oranges, grapefruit, lemons), pineapple, grapes, berries, raisins, rhubarb, dates, prunes

Soothing beverages

If diarrhea lasts for more than a couple of days, or if you have more than 4-5 episodes a day, tell your nurse or health care provider. They may recommend a prescription medicine to decrease diarrhea. Some of the drinks below are traditional recipes that have been used to treat diarrhea and calm the gut.

Oral Electrolyte solution

- 4 cups of water
- ½ teaspoon salt or sea salt
- 6 teaspoons sugar
- *Mix all ingredients and chill.*

Congee (rice water)

- 1 cup rice
- 5-6 cups water
- 1 teaspoon salt
- *Combine rice and water in a pot. Cook the rice for at least 2 hours. This will leave you with a sticky, soupy mixture. You can also cook it in a crock pot.*
- Variations to basic congee recipe include:
 - Try broth instead of water (you can omit the salt)
 - Cook with a vegetable (sweet potato, mushrooms, winter squash, or carrots)
 - Cook with herbs (ginger root, thyme, cinnamon sticks)
 - Use different grains (millet or barley)

Tropical Rescue

- 1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
- ¼ cup lime juice
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- 4 cups coconut water
- 1/8 teaspoon sea salt
- 2 tablespoons honey
- *Place in blender and blend until mixed, or stir in pitcher by hand.*

Tropical Smoothie

- Homemade smoothies are a versatile drink that can be adjusted to meet your taste and food preferences as well as meeting targeted calorie and protein needs.
- 1 cup papaya
 - ½ cup mango
 - 1 medium banana
 - 8 ounces plain yogurt, rice milk, or juice.
 - *Combine in a blender and thin to desired consistency. Drink smoothies slowly and in smaller quantities (4-6 ounces).*

Resources

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Nutrition Care Manual: nutritioncaremanual.org/

This education resource was intended to be given as a part of a nutrition consult by a Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center dietitian. Questions? Ask a Fred Hutch dietitian at nutrition@seattlecca.org.