

DIARRHEA, ACUTE



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

An abnormal increase in the liquidity and frequency of stools. This is a symptom, not a disease. Simple diarrhea is common among all age groups.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Cramping abdominal pain.
- Loose, watery or unformed bowel movements.
- Lack of bowel control (sometimes).
- Fever (sometimes).

CAUSES

Either the intestines produce too much fluid or not enough fluid is absorbed from the intestines. There are many causes, including infections.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Viral gastroenteritis (stomach "flu").
- Food intolerance or lactose intolerance.
- Emotional upsets or stress.
- Food poisoning.
- Eating foods, such as prunes or beans.
- Children in daycare.
- Food allergy.
- Malabsorption syndromes.
- Disease or tumor of the pancreas.
- Diverticulitis, appendicitis, or fecal impaction.
- Excess alcohol use.
- Use of drugs, such as laxatives, antacids, antibiotics, quinine, or anticancer drugs.
- Radiation treatments for cancer.
- Recent illness.
- Irritable bowel syndrome.
- Inflammatory bowel disease.
- Crowded or unsanitary living conditions.
- Weak immune system due to illness or drugs.
- Travel to foreign country.
- Drinking contaminated water.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Wash hands often to prevent spread of germs, especially after using the bathroom.
- Avoid undercooked or raw seafood, buffet or picnic foods left out for several hours, and food served by street vendors.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

It goes away by itself and leaves no lasting effects. Most cases of diarrhea last a short time (24 to 48 hours) and a search for the cause may be unnecessary.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Dehydration if diarrhea is prolonged, especially in infants.



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- In most cases, this disorder will be self-treated at home. Call your health care provider if symptoms are more severe or they cause you any concern.
- Your health care provider may do a physical exam. Medical tests may include studies of blood and stool.
- Treatment usually involves drinking plenty of fluids and rest as needed. There is no specific drug therapy.
- It is not necessary to keep persons with diarrhea away from others in the family or household. Try to avoid close contact if possible. Wash hands often.
- Hospital care may be needed, if dehydration is severe.

MEDICATIONS

- Drugs are usually not needed for treatment. If symptoms are severe or prolonged, you may use drugs for nausea or diarrhea such as loperamide or Pepto-Bismol.
- Some infections may require specific drug treatment.
- If a drug you take is the cause of the problem, you may be advised to change drugs or stop taking the drug.

ACTIVITY

Get extra rest if needed. Be sure to have access to a toilet or bedpan.

DIET

- Suck ice chips or drink small amounts of clear fluids often. Replace lost fluids and electrolytes with products such as Pedialyte or Ricelyte for infants and children, and diluted rehydration fluids (Gatorade) for adults.
- Once the symptoms improve, try a diet of complex carbohydrates (rice, wheat, potatoes, bread, cereal, and lean meat such as chicken). Milk and dairy products usually do not need to be limited.
- Avoid high sugar foods or fatty foods for a few days.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- Diarrhea lasts more than 48 hours.
- Mucus, blood, or worms appear in the stool, or fever or severe pain develops in the abdomen or rectum.
- Dehydration develops. Signs include dry mouth, wrinkled skin, excess thirst, and little or no urination.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page