

## Patient information

# Diarrhoea

Everyone at some time will suffer from diarrhoea.

### What is diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea is the discharge of water stools, usually several times a day. Cramping pain is also common with feeling bloated. It is caused when the intestines become over stimulated and push stools through before the bowel has had a chance to absorb the water.

Diarrhoea if not treated can cause dehydration which means the body lacks enough fluid to function properly. It is vital that younger children and the elderly seek medical advice if they have diarrhoea to avoid serious health problems.

### What causes diarrhoea?

There are many causes of diarrhoea, fortunately most of them are short lived and clear up on their own. Among the many known causes are:

- Food intolerance
- Bacterial infection
- Viral infection
- Intestinal disease
- Bowel disorders
- Reaction to medicines
- Stress

### What are the Symptoms?

Diarrhoea may be accompanied by cramping abdominal pain, bloating, nausea or an urgent need to use the bathroom. Depending on the causes of the diarrhoea you may also have a fever and/or bloody stools.

Diarrhoea can be either acute (short term) or chronic (long term). The acute form, which lasts less than 4 weeks, is related to a bacterial, viral or parasitic infection.

Chronic diarrhoea lasts more than 4 weeks and is usually related to functional disorders like irritable bowel syndrome, or inflammatory bowel disease like coeliac disease.

## **Signs and symptoms of dehydration**

General signs include:

- Thirst, dry mouth
- Dry skin
- Poor urine output, dark urine
- Fatigue and lightheadedness

## **When should you consult your doctor?**

Although usually not harmful, diarrhoea can become dangerous if the symptoms persist, especially if you have a small bowel stoma (ileostomy). You should see your doctor if **any** of the following is true:

- You have had diarrhoea for more than 3 days
- You have severe pain in the abdomen or rectum
- You have a high temperature
- You see blood in your stools or they are black and tarry looking.
- You have signs of dehydration

## **Diagnosis**

Again this depends on the cause but a history of your illness is vital. You will also need to provide a sample to be sent to the hospital for analysis.

Blood tests will be helpful to diagnose infection and your general health. Food allergy testing in chronic diarrhoea may be required. Also for chronic disease you may require a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy which is when the doctor uses a special instrument to look inside the rectum and colon.

## **What is the treatment?**

The most important treatment is to replace the fluid lost. It is vital, especially if you have a stoma, to drink plenty of fluids. If you are unable to do so seek medical advice straight away. Some medication can be taken to stop diarrhoea, but if you think you have a bacterial infection or parasite, this is not recommended as it prevents the passage of the organism, thus prolonging the problem.

## Tips about your diet

Until the diarrhoea subsides, try to avoid milk products and foods that are greasy, high in fibre or very sweet.

Drink plenty of fluids, aim for a minimum of 8-10 cups a day. If you can tolerate fluids then gradually build up to a bland diet, e.g. toast, crackers, biscuits, fish, chicken, etc.

## Important points to remember

- Diarrhoea is a common problem that usually resolves on its own.
- But diarrhoea is dangerous if a person becomes dehydrated.

## For more information please contact:

Senior Colorectal Nurse Specialist

Colorectal Nurse Specialist

Colorectal/Stoma Nurse Specialist

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