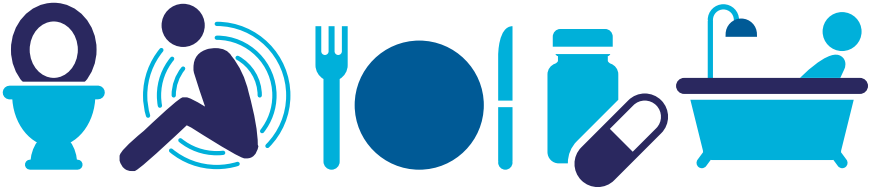


---

# How to Manage Your Diarrhea



## This patient guide will help you understand:

What is cancer-related diarrhea?	<b>pg 2</b>
What causes cancer-related diarrhea?	<b>pg 3</b>
What can I do to manage diarrhea?	<b>pg 4</b>
When should I talk to my health care team?	<b>pg 11</b>
Where can I get more information?	<b>pg 13</b>

This guide is for people who have diarrhea before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients, family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

# What is cancer-related diarrhea?

---

## **Diarrhea is common for people with cancer. It:**

Is loose, watery or unformed stool (poo) that might look like many little flakes or pieces

---

Happens more than 3 or 4 times a day

---

May cause an urgent need to go to the bathroom and you may not be able to stop yourself from having a bowel movement (going poo)

---

Can last for a few hours or become a problem that lasts a long time

---

## **Diarrhea may also cause:**

Stomach cramps

---

Bloating

---

Restlessness or agitation

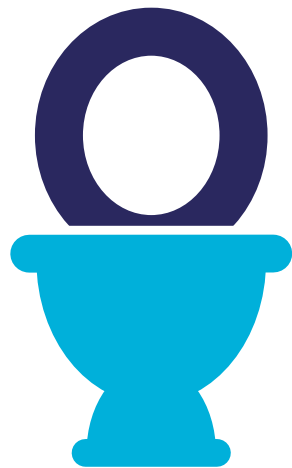
---

Sore skin in the bum area from going to the bathroom a lot

---

Dehydration (when your body does not have enough liquids), which can cause:

- thirst
  - a dry mouth and tongue
  - dark yellow pee or a need to pee less often than normal
- 

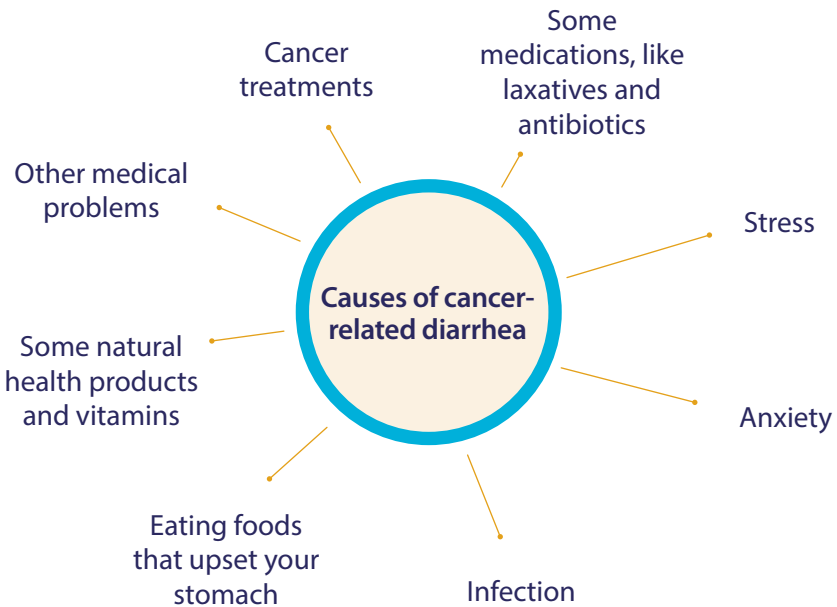


# What causes cancer-related diarrhea?

---

It is important to find and treat the causes of your diarrhea.

**This picture shows things that can cause diarrhea:**



# What can I do to manage my diarrhea?

---

## Take anti-diarrhea medication if your health care team prescribed it

### Be safe!

- ✔ Check with your pharmacist before taking over-the-counter medication that has bismuth subsalicylate (like Pepto Bismol) or loperamide (like Imodium), to make sure it is safe for you to use.
- ✔ Your health care team's directions might be different from what is written on the box of medicine. **Always do what your health care team tells you.**

If you take laxatives or stool softeners you will probably be told to stop taking them while you have diarrhea.

---

Some medications, like metoclopramide, domperidone and antacids with magnesium, can make your diarrhea worse. Stop taking them while you have diarrhea, unless your doctor has told you something different.

---

Some herbal medicines and natural health products like saw palmetto, ginseng, milk thistle, plantago seed, and aloe may make your diarrhea worse.

---



## Drink lots of liquids

Diarrhea can cause dehydration. Drinking more will not stop your diarrhea, but it will help make up for the liquids you lose.



**Drink at least 6 to 8 cups of liquids each day.**

### Be safe!

- ✓ Talk to your health care team if you cannot drink 6-8 cups of liquids each day when you have diarrhea. You may need special liquids with salt and sugar, called Oral Rehydration Therapy.
- ✓ If your diarrhea is severe (more than 7 times a day) you may need to get liquids intravenously (through an IV) to keep you hydrated.

Drink an extra cup of liquid for every watery bowel movement (poo) you have. Sports drinks are a good choice.

Drink small amounts many times during the day.

Drink liquids slowly.

Warm or room temperature liquids may be easier to drink.

If you want to drink juice, dilute it with water. Mix half juice and half water.

Do not eat or drink anything with artificial sweetener (like chewing gum, candy, cough drops and "diet" drinks"), when you have diarrhea. These sweeteners may make your gas and diarrhea worse. If your medication has any of these ingredients, do not stop taking it. Speak with your doctor or pharmacist about a different choice.

## Change your diet



Eat many small meals and snacks instead of 2 or 3 large meals.

Eat slowly, take small bites and chew food well.

Remove all skins, peels, membranes and seeds from fruits and vegetables.

### Be safe!

- ✓ Check with your health care team before taking probiotics or eating foods with probiotics.

You can start eating your usual diet once you have not had diarrhea for about 12 hours and you don't have to take medications to stop your diarrhea. Check with your health care team for what they advise.

Slowly add foods back into your diet so that you don't upset your stomach.

**Ask your health care team to refer you to a registered dietitian.** A dietitian can help you find ways to eat and drink well when you have diarrhea. You can visit [EatRightOntario.ca](https://www.eatrightontario.ca) or call **1-877-510-5102** to connect with a registered dietitian for free.

Drinks to help ease diarrhea	Foods to help ease diarrhea
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Water, clear juice, ice chips or popsicles</li><li>✓ Flat non-fizzy, non-caffeinated drinks</li><li>✓ Broth, strained clear soup</li><li>✓ Milk, if your body tolerates it</li><li>✓ Low lactose milk if you are lactose intolerant</li><li>✓ Ask your health care team about oral rehydration solutions (a mix of water, salt and sugar that keeps you hydrated)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Fruit like peeled pears, apples, apricots, bananas and canned fruit like apple sauce and peaches</li><li>✓ Vegetables like cooked and peeled squash, carrots, potatoes, sweet potatoes and turnips</li><li>✓ Breads and low fibre cereals like oatmeal, cold rice cereal, pasta, white rice and tapioca</li><li>✓ Protein from foods like eggs, meat, chicken, yogurt and smooth peanut butter</li></ul>
Drinks you should limit	Foods you should limit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Caffeine</li><li>✗ Prune juice, fruit juice with pulp</li><li>✗ Pop and fizzy drinks</li><li>✗ Alcohol</li><li>✗ Limit milk and dairy products if they make your diarrhea worse</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Dried and seedy fruits, like prunes, raisins and berries</li><li>✗ Spicy foods</li><li>✗ Corn, broccoli, chickpeas, lentils, beans, cabbage, onion, garlic</li><li>✗ Greasy and fried meats, eggs, sausage, bacon and salami</li><li>✗ Whole wheat breads, high fibre cereals and grains</li><li>✗ Brown rice, wild rice, quinoa</li><li>✗ Raw vegetables and fresh fruits like papaya</li><li>✗ Gravy and rich sauces</li><li>✗ Sweets and heavy desserts</li></ul>

For more nutrition information see the Canadian Cancer Society's 'Eating well when you have cancer' patient information booklet. For more information go to: [www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

## Plan for outings

Sometimes diarrhea can cause an urgent need to get to a bathroom. Plan ahead so you can feel more comfortable leaving home.



Find the nearest bathroom before you need it when you go out.

---

Bring a change of clothes in case of an accident.

---

If you think an accident may happen, wear absorbent, throw-away underwear.

---



## Take care of your skin

When you have diarrhea, the skin around your bum area can get damaged and be painful. To avoid infection or feeling uncomfortable, use these tips to take care of your skin:



### Take a sitz bath

**A sitz bath is a warm, soothing soak for your perineal or bum area.**

You can use your bathtub, a large basin or a plastic sitz bath that fits over a toilet seat. You can buy a plastic sitz bath from a drug store.

#### **A sitz bath:**

- Cleans your skin
- Lowers the chance of infection
- Soothes your skin and makes it feel better
- Helps get blood flowing to the area to speed up healing

### Tips

Add 1-2 tablespoons of baking soda or 1-2 teaspoons of salt to the water.

---

Do not add bath oils or anything else to the water.

---

Soak your bottom for about 10-15 minutes each time.

---

Have as many sitz baths as you like to stay comfortable.

---

### **Other things to do if the skin is still sore:**

Leave your bottom open to the air as much as possible.

---

Wear cotton underwear with no elastic around the leg holes. Large boxer shorts are great for both men and women.

---

Your health care team may give you an ointment or cream to protect open skin and prevent infections.

---

Over-the-counter creams and ointments with zinc oxide may help protect and heal the skin.

---

### **Watch for signs of infection**

It is normal for tender skin to leak liquid as it heals. Clear, white liquid and blood streaks or specks are common and normal.

---

Tell your health care team if your skin is painful, swollen, bleeding a lot or you notice it leaking liquids other than clear or white.

---

### **More tips**

- If pee splashes on your sore skin, try sitting in a different way on the toilet. Use a clean jug filled with warm water to clean the area as you pee. Pat the area dry afterwards.
- Do not use things like perfume, talcum powder or dressing tape on broken skin.
- Walking may make your skin sore. Rest a lot and let air get to the sore areas.

# When should I talk to my health care team?

---

## **Tell your health care team right away if you have these symptoms:**

Diarrhea that continues for over 24 hours even after you have tried anti-diarrhea medication

---

A fever of 38.3°C (100.9°F) or higher at any time **or** 38.0°C (100.4°F) or higher for at least one hour

---

Blood in your stool (poo)

---

You feel tired, weak or dizzy

---

Chest pains

---

Vomiting (throwing up)

---

You have little or very dark pee

---

You are unable to eat or afraid to eat

---

## What is symptom screening?

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

Use the boxes below to help your health care team understand your symptom.

0 is no diarrhea and 10 is the worst possible diarrhea.

### 0-3

You may have **Mild** diarrhea if:

You have diarrhea less than 4 times each day

### 4-6

You may have **Moderate** diarrhea if:

You have diarrhea 4 – 6 times per day

### 7-10

You may have **Severe** diarrhea if:

You have diarrhea more than 7 times per day

Your poo is very loose or watery

You need to run to the bathroom often during the day and/or night

Your health care team wants to hear about your diarrhea. Your questions and concerns are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

# Where can I get more information?

---

For links to these and other helpful resources, go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

**Cancer Care Ontario**

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

**Canadian Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

1-888-939-3333

**Dietitians of Canada**

[www.dietitians.ca](http://www.dietitians.ca)

## Support services:

**CSS Community Services**

**Locator for local support groups**

[www.cancer.ca/csl](http://www.cancer.ca/csl)

**Peer Support Service —**

**Talk to someone who's  
been there**

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

**Cancer Chat Canada**

[www.cancerchatcanada.ca](http://www.cancerchatcanada.ca)

## Books:

**Eating well when you  
have cancer**

[www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

**Goes Down Easy:  
Recipes to help you cope  
with the challenge of eating  
during cancer treatment —**

Elise Mecklinger, 2006

## **Ask your health care team for more information about managing your diarrhea.**

Self-management classes:

---

---

---

Local support groups:

---

---

---

Videos:

---

---

---

Books:

---

---

---

Pamphlets:

---

---

---

**Ask your health care team who to contact if you ever feel that your symptoms need immediate medical attention.**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Notes:**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Guide: Tips to help you manage your diarrhea (The Ottawa Hospital)
- Nutrition Management of Diarrhea (London Health Sciences Centre)
- Eating hints for people with diarrhea (University Health Network)
- Having a sitz bath at home (University Health Network)
- Ideas to help manage diarrhea (North York General)
- Caring for your skin in the groin and anal area (University Health Network)
- Managing bowel problems after cancer treatment (University Health Network)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about diarrhea. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing diarrhea. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

Need this information in an accessible format?

**1-855-460-2647 | TTY (416) 217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)**

For other patient guides please go to:

**[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)**

---

Was this patient guide helpful? Let us know at: **[cco.fluidsurveys.com/s/guides/](http://cco.fluidsurveys.com/s/guides/)**

Version 1 – 2016

Cancer Care Ontario retains all copyright, trademark and all other rights in the guide, including all text and graphic images. No portion of this Resource may be used or reproduced, other than for personal use, or distributed, transmitted or "mirrored" in any form, or by any means, without the prior written permission of Cancer Care Ontario.