

Diarrhea & Cancer

Diarrhea and constipation are experienced commonly by people with cancer. When you have diarrhea, you may have unformed, watery, or liquid bowel movements. Diarrhea can contribute to dehydration, electrolyte imbalance, leg cramps, weakness, and skin irritation between your buttocks. Changes in bowel function can be caused by changes to your body's metabolism. These can be caused by disease, medications, or radiation therapy to your pelvis.



Medications that can cause diarrhea include:

- Chemotherapy
- Overuse of laxatives; this may happen when treating constipation

It is important to treat diarrhea for your safety, comfort, and quality of life.

What to do if you have diarrhea:

- Drink water (e.g., 2-3 quarts every 24 hours) to help protect your kidneys and replace fluid loss.
- Eat BRAT foods: bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast, or BRATTY foods: bananas, rice, applesauce, toast, tea, and yogurt.
- Drink Gatorade® or chicken broth to replace electrolytes.
- If needed, take anti-diarrhea medications (e.g., Loperamide/Imodium®) as directed. The maximum dose of Imodium® is 16 mg/day.
- Use Aquaphor® or barrier cream for rectal skin irritation due to diarrhea.
- Rest. Take naps as needed.
- Wash your hands frequently to prevent the spread of any bacteria or infection found in bowel movements.

Call your doctor if you experience:

- Diarrhea lasting for 3 days or more.
- Diarrhea is associated with fever, abdominal cramping, or bleeding.

Visit our website for more information about support groups, clinical trials and lifestyle information.

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NOTE: This information is provided to you as an educational service of National Jewish Health. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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