



CANCER  
INFAMILY  
— build knowledge



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## DIARRHEA

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*This leaflet discusses how to deal with diarrhea, an ailment that sometimes develops during chemotherapy. Ask your doctor if you should expect this side effect from your treatment(s).*

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# Diarrhea

Diarrhea appears when chemotherapy destroys the cells coating the intestine, or if an infection develops. The result is to go to the washroom much more often, or/and have stools softer or watery. When this happens, less water and nutrients are absorbed so you must increase their intake, in particular fluids to prevent dehydration (which can lead to hospitalization).

If you have diarrhea for more than 24 hours, or severe pain, cramping, loss of blood or mucus, inform your doctor without delay. You might be losing too much water and risking dehydration. The doctor might need to prescribe anti-diarrhea medication. Be sure to follow the prescription or you might end up with constipation.



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## *Diarrhea, what can be done to help*

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### **Food and Liquids**

- ✘ Eat regularly, but small meals or snacks. Avoid large meals.

### **Avoid:**

- ✘ High-fiber foods (e.g. whole grain bread and cereals, fresh vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, popcorn and fresh or dried fruits).
  - ✘ Mixing gas-producing foods (e.g. beans and cabbages) in the same meal.
  - ✘ Fried, fatty or spicy foods.
  - ✘ Milk or dairy products if you feel they aggravate your diarrhea. Do not eat unpasteurized foods.
  - ✘ Coffee, caffeinated tea, alcohol, or drinks with artificial sweeteners.
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**Take:**

- × Foods with low fiber content (e.g. white bread, white rice or noodles, lactose-free cereals, ripe bananas, cooked or preserved fruit (skinless), cottage cheese, yogurt, eggs, mashed potatoes or baked potatoes (again no skin), carrot puree, chicken or turkey (skinless) or fish.
- × Food rich in potassium such as bananas, oranges, sweet potatoes, peach and apricot nectars - unless if your doctor tells you otherwise.
- × Plenty of fluids to replace those you lost.
- × Varied drinks, but always without gas or pulp (e.g. water, apple or cranberry juice, or broth). Cook rice to drink its water throughout the day or to add to soup. Be sure that these liquids are at room temperature and drink them slowly. Be sure that all carbonated drinks have lost the gas before having them.
- × Rehydration solutions - drinks that contain water, minerals and often sugar to replace those lost with diarrhea. Buy them in pharmacies; do not make them yourself, as the right concentrations are crucial.

**General Recommendations**

- × Ask your doctor if you can take an antidiarrheal, and which one she/he advises.
- × Keep the rectal area clean and dry to avoid skin irritation. If it is already irritated, try stay seated in warm water during the bath. Your doctor may also recommend a moisturizer to apply locally after defecation.
- × If you have cramps, warming up the area/belly tends to help. You can use a hot water bottle or even a blanket.
- × Do not use suppositories without checking first with your doctor. Also ask him/her to indicate a nutritionist to accompany you.



*If you have severe diarrhea (more than 7 or 8 trips to the toilet per day)*

Inform your doctor immediately. Ask if you should start a soft (without gas) liquid diet to calm down your gut.

As you start feeling better, introduce foods with low fiber content and take pro and prebiotic medication to restore your intestinal flora (supermarket products as bio yogurts are not a reliable source of these). A liquid diet lacks essential nutrients so don't stay on it for more than 3 days.

If you do not feel better, you may need intravenous fluids to replace the water and nutrients lost.

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**Sources:** American Cancer Society, Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Mayo Clinic and recent research papers / **Scientific Review:** Maria Rita Dionísio, Médica Oncologista, Fundação Champalimaud / **Content:** Susana Lamas, Dr Catarina Amorim / **Project coordination:** Filipe Santos Silva / **Design:** [www.estudiorjdesign.com](http://www.estudiorjdesign.com) / **Illustrations:** [www.zecardoso.com](http://www.zecardoso.com) / **Project by:** Public Awareness of Cancer Unit, IPATIMUP October 2018 / **+ info:** [www.cancronafamilia.org](http://www.cancronafamilia.org)