

Understanding Diarrhea During Cancer Treatment

Diarrhea is a common side effect experienced by many patients undergoing cancer therapy. While it can be uncomfortable and sometimes serious, knowing how to manage it effectively can help prevent complications and keep your treatment on track.

What Is Diarrhea?

Diarrhea occurs when you have more bowel movements than usual, and your stools become loose or watery. It may be accompanied by abdominal pain, cramping, or discomfort. Diarrhea can lead to other health problems such as weakness, loss of appetite, dehydration, electrolyte imbalances, and infections.

What Causes Diarrhea?

Several factors related to cancer or its treatment can cause diarrhea:

- **Certain cancers:** Pancreatic, gastric, and colorectal cancers
- **Chemotherapy:** Especially drugs like 5-fluorouracil (5FU), capecitabine, and irinotecan
- **Immunotherapy:** Particularly immune-checkpoint inhibitors
- **Targeted drug therapy:** Such as tyrosine kinase inhibitors
- **Radiation therapy:** To the brain, abdomen, pelvis, bowel, bladder, or reproductive organs
- **Infections:** Including *C. difficile* (*C. diff*) or neutropenic enterocolitis
- **Small bowel obstructions or graft-versus-host disease** after a stem cell transplant

Diarrhea from chemotherapy often starts a few days after treatment, while diarrhea from immunotherapy or targeted drugs may develop weeks or months later. Your care team may order tests like stool analysis, imaging, or blood tests to identify the cause.

Symptoms of Diarrhea

Symptoms can vary, but common signs include:

- Frequent, loose, watery stools
- Blood or mucus in stools
- Abdominal pain or cramps
- Bloating or swelling
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Urgent need to use the bathroom

Seek emergency care if you experience:

- Bleeding from your rectum that won't stop
- Severe or persistent belly pain
- Inability to urinate or eat for over a day
- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher

Managing Diarrhea

Medications:

- Antibiotics or other medicines may be needed if infection is involved.
- Antidiarrheal medicines like Imodium may be used if there's no infection.
- Steroids can help if diarrhea results from immunotherapy.
- If dehydrated, your doctor may give intravenous (IV) fluids and electrolytes.

Food and Fluids:

- **Avoid:** Caffeine, alcohol, spicy, fatty, sugary foods, and acidic drinks (like citrus or soda).
- **Eat:** A clear liquid diet (water, weak tea, broth, popsicles, Jell-O) when diarrhea begins or is likely.
- **Switch to:** The BRAT diet (bananas, rice, applesauce, toast) or easy-to-digest foods like potatoes, noodles, cereal, or cooked vegetables.
- **Stay Hydrated:** Drink at least one cup of fluids after each loose bowel movement to replace lost fluids.

Additional Tips:

- Refrain from tobacco use.
- Avoid supplements like aloe, milk thistle, ginseng, or high doses of vitamin C.
- Track your bowel movements to monitor severity.
- Use damp toilet paper or wipes to soothe skin.
- Sitz baths or warm water sitting baths may relieve discomfort.
- Applying petroleum jelly or ointment around the anus can reduce soreness.

When to Contact Your Care Team

Call your cancer care team if you experience:

- Diarrhea lasting more than 24 hours
- Inability to keep liquids down for more than 24 hours
- Blood in your stool
- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher

Know who to contact when the clinic is closed and what symptoms require urgent attention. Prompt management is important to prevent dehydration and other complications.

Summary

Diarrhea can be a manageable side effect with proper dietary adjustments, medications, and hydration. Always inform your healthcare team about your symptoms so they can provide the best care. Addressing diarrhea early helps keep you comfortable and ensures your treatment continues smoothly.

Your health and comfort are important—don't hesitate to reach out to your care team with any concerns.

Where can I find out more information about diarrhea?

What is Diarrhea? | American Cancer Society

- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/diarrhea.html>

Diarrhea and Cancer Treatment—Side Effects | National Cancer Institute

- <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/diarrhea>

Chemotherapy and You | National Cancer Institute

- <https://www.cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/chemotherapy-and-you.pdf>

Diarrhea | Cancer.net

- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/diarrhea.html>

Notes

Updated Date: September 29, 2025

Scan the QR code below to access this education sheet.



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