

# DIARRHEA

## TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

### DESCRIPTION

The passage of many loose, watery or unformed bowel movements. This is a symptom, not a disease. Simple diarrhea is common among all age groups.

### FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Cramping abdominal pain.
- Loose, watery or unformed bowel movements.
- Lack of bowel control (sometimes).
- Fever (sometimes).

### CAUSES

There are many causes including infections (viral, parasitic or bacterial).

### RISK INCREASES WITH

- Emotional upsets or acute stress.
- Food poisoning.
- Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis
- Use of some sugar or fat substitutes
- Malabsorption syndromes.
- Disease or tumor of the pancreas (malignant or benign).
- Diverticulitis.
- Food, such as prunes or beans.
- Excess alcohol consumption.
- Use of drugs, such as laxatives, antacids, antibiotics, quinine or anticancer drugs.
- Food allergy.
- Radiation illness.
- Crowded or unsanitary living conditions.
- Immunosuppression due to illness or drugs.
- Travel to foreign country.
- Ingestion of water from streams, springs, or untested wells.

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

If diarrhea is recurrent and a cause can be identified, treatment or avoidance of the cause should prevent recurrence. Everyone is likely to have bouts of diarrhea occasionally from insignificant causes which disappear and leave no lasting effects. Most cases of acute diarrhea last a short time and a search for the cause may not be necessary. Avoid under cooked or raw seafood, buffet or picnic foods left out several hours, and food served by street vendors.

### EXPECTED OUTCOME

Spontaneous recovery in 24 to 48 hours.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Dehydration if diarrhea is prolonged, especially in infants.

### GENERAL MEASURES

Diagnostic tests may include a laboratory study of the stool. A detailed history about the symptoms, time and duration of diarrhea, the severity, and the patient's general health can help determine a cause. If there is evidence of a more serious disorder, further medical tests may be conducted. Diarrhea is a symptom. If possible, the underlying disorder should be treated. If you think a prescription drug is causing the diarrhea, consult with the doctor before discontinuing it. If cramps are present, place hot compresses, a hot-water bottle or an electric heating pad on the abdomen. Maintain fluid intake. Severe diarrhea may require urgent fluid and electrolyte replacement to correct dehydration.

### MEDICATION

For minor discomfort, you may use non-prescription antidiarrheal medications. Follow directions on package for optimum results.

### OTHER ANTIDIARRHEAL MEDICATIONS MAY BE PRESCRIBED.

Antibiotic may be prescribed if a particular parasite or bacteria is identified.

### ACTIVITY & DIET

Decrease activity until diarrhea stops. For the first 24 hours, take only clear liquids, such as small amounts of carbonated beverages (stirred to remove bubbles), diluted half-strength apple juice, jell-o (solid or liquid), or popsicles. Avoid alcohol, caffeine, milk and dairy products. After 24 hours, eat soft foods, such as cooked cereal, rice, soup (not creamed), applesauce, bananas, dry cereal (no milk), crackers, pretzels, or toast (no butter for 1 or 2 days.) Resume a normal diet 2 or 3 days after the diarrhea stops. Avoid fruit, alcohol and highly seasoned foods for several more days.

### NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF...

- Diarrhea lasts more than 48 hours.
- Mucus, blood or worms appear in the stool.
- Stools black or tarry.
- Fever rises to 101°F (38.3°C) or higher.
- Severe pain develops in the abdomen or rectum.
- Dehydration develops. Signs include dry mouth, wrinkled skin, excess thirst, little or no urination.

Student Health Center

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