

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
Department of Developmental Services

HEALTH IDENTIFIERS & SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS

DIARRHEA

Diarrhea occurs when you have repeated bowel movements that are watery and loose. Diarrhea is usually not a serious problem, although if it continues it can lead to dehydration. Dehydration is a serious condition that requires prompt medical attention. Diarrhea is also sometimes called “loose stools” or “loose bowel movement.”



SOME FACTS about Diarrhea

- Diarrhea is a way for your body to get rid of viruses, poisons and bacteria that are in the digestive tract.
- It usually occurs because your body moves the stool through your bowel so quickly that water cannot be fully absorbed.
- Most cases of diarrhea will go away within a day or two if you stay away from solid foods and drink clear liquids.



CAUSES

Usually diarrhea is due to a **stomach virus**.

It can also be caused by:

- **Food poisoning** – often from improper food handling
- Drinking dirty or **untreated water** (parasite infection)
- **Medications** - including antibiotics and laxatives
- **Food Allergies**, especially to milk and milk products and artificial sweeteners

Other less common causes can include:

- **Medical Illnesses or Conditions:** an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism), irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, tumors, hepatitis, and diverticulitis.
- **Problems with the bowel:** severe constipation, bowel obstruction or twisted bowel.



SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- **Stool** (bowel movement) is **watery** (liquid) or **very loose** (soft/no shape)
- **Unable to hold** loose bowel movement (may “mess” pants)
- **Frequent bowel movements** within a 24-hr time

A person with diarrhea may also:

- Be very **thirsty**
- **Lose** their **appetite**
- Pass a lot of **gas**
- Experience **soreness** around their anus
- Show other **signs of illness** such as fever, stomach ache and throwing up



PREVENTION

- **Wash Hands.** The best way to prevent a viral infection is to keep hands washed, especially before eating or preparing food and after going to the bathroom.
- **Proper Food Handling.** Follow safe food storage and preparation guidelines. Always keep raw foods separated from cooked, frozen or ready-to-eat foods. Refrigerate foods at the proper temperature and discard those that have not been used in the proper amount of time. Pay special attention to milk and milk products, uncooked meat and poultry, eggs and fish. Always carefully clean raw vegetables and fruit before eating. Cook foods to the proper temperatures and serve them right away. Wash hands before and after preparing food and make sure you carefully clean cutting boards and counters after use.



WHAT TO DO

- **Increase Fluids.** Give more water or other clear liquids to drink. Avoid milk or drinks with caffeine or alcohol. The person should sip slowly and drink up to a quart of liquid each hour.
- **Do not eat solid foods.** Only give “clear” foods such as broth, popsicles or jello for 24 hrs or until the symptoms stop. When feeling better, start offering mild foods such as cooked rice, bananas, applesauce or dry toast.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- **DO NOT** offer **milk** or foods that are made from milk or contain caffeine.
- **DO NOT** offer **fresh fruits, vegetables, greasy or spicy foods** or foods high in **fiber** for 2-3 days after the diarrhea stops.
- **DO NOT** give any **anti-diarrheal medication** such as Kaopectate, Immodium or Kaolin unless told to by your doctor.



DOCUMENT

- Keep a running log if the individual experiences diarrhea or if documentation of bowel movements is part of his/her Support Plan. Share this with their physician.
- File an Incident Report (if required) and complete other documentation such as writing down a description in the logbook (or other notebook depending on where they live) if the person requires emergency medical care.



CALL THE DOCTOR

Call the doctor or nurse if the person has more than **4 bowel movements in 8 hrs** or if other people who have eaten the same food also have diarrhea.

Also call if they have diarrhea and:

- **Severe cramps** or stomach pain (see Fact Sheet # 1)
- Develop a **fever**
- Have **blood** in their bowel movement
- Stool is **black** or “oily”
- **Don't urinate** (pee)
- Are also **throwing up** (vomiting)
- Show signs of **dehydration** (see Fact Sheet #7)
- Have **started a new medicine**



EMERGENCY

Severe dehydration is a **medical emergency**. Get the individual to a hospital or call 911 if you observe:

- **Confusion** or sudden behavior change
- **Fainting** or extreme lightheadedness
- **Loss of consciousness** – won't wake up
- Shallow, **rapid breathing**
- **Gray or pale skin** or **blue lips**



TO LEARN MORE – Go to these websites:

- <http://www.health.allrefer.com/health/diarrhea-causes.html>
- <http://www.webMD.com/>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com>