

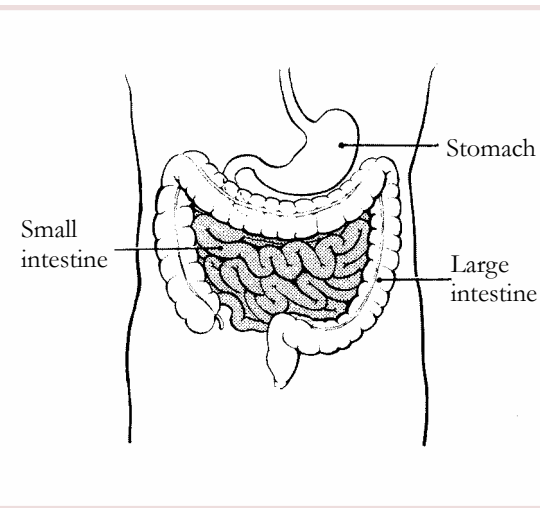
Diarrhea

Everyone has diarrhea at one time or another. We all have our own idea of exactly what diarrhea is. Is it one liquid stool each day? Is it several soft, semiformed stools each day? Or is it frequent, watery stools throughout the day and even the night? Stool is made up mostly of water. For the average person in the Western World, the maximum daily amount of water in stool is generally no more than 7 oz. or 200 ml (8 oz. = 1 cup). When it is consistently more, then medically it is called diarrhea.

Causes of Diarrhea

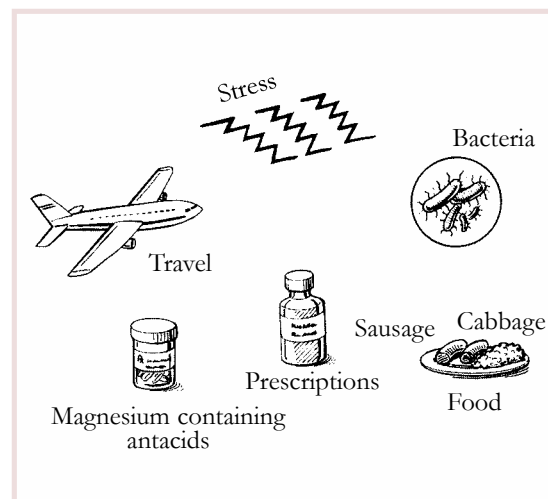
There are many causes of diarrhea. Fortunately, in most instances, the change in bowel habits is short lived and clears up on its own. In these cases, we assume it is a virus infection or even “something I ate.” Whenever diarrhea lasts more than two to three weeks, medical advice is generally recommended. Among the many known causes are:

- Food - Most people have certain foods that may cause diarrhea. For hot pepper lovers (the chemical in it is called capaiscin), diarrhea often occurs the morning after. Many people are



intolerant to milk and milk products so that even small amounts of the milk sugar lactose can cause diarrhea. Large amounts of fatty foods cause the same problem in other people. The obvious solution in all these instances is to avoid the offending agent.

- Chemical Laxatives - Many people become dependent on laxatives early in life and use them on a daily basis. The names for the usual chemical stimulants: Milk of Magnesia, magnesium (Epsom salt), cascara (Nature’s Remedy), phenolphthalein (Exlax, Correctol, Feen-A-Mint). Magnesium can be inadvertently ingested in various over-the-counter preparations such as Maalox or Mylanta. Check labels! Sorbitol is an artificial sweetener that is used in sugar free gum and prepared foods such as jams and jellies. Sorbitol, too, is a laxative.
- Prescription Drugs - If a change in bowel habit occurs after taking a new drug, the physician should be contacted. In particular, antibiotics are known to cause diarrhea, at times quite severe. Diarrhea can develop up to one month after taking antibiotics.
- Infection - There are over 400 different bacteria that normally live quietly and beneficially in the large intestine. There are also many viruses and other infectious agents that find their way into our bodies. Some of these can infect the intestinal tract and cause diarrhea. Fortunately, most of the time these infections come and go on their own. Some bacterial infections, such as salmonella, are nasty and require medical evaluation. Salmonella commonly comes from contaminated poultry. There are parasites, such as amoeba and Giardia, that attack the intestines. Giardia is often found in wild animals and in contaminated streams and well water. For people infected with the AIDS virus, there are a number of infections that can occur in the intestinal tract. Close medical follow-up is always required in these instances. Virus infection is probably the most common cause of transient diarrhea and, fortunately, it usually clears up on its own.



- Traveler’s Diarrhea - The cause of traveler’s diarrhea is a toxic bacteria called E. Coli. It most often occurs in developing countries where sanitation is not good. This infection can often be prevented by avoiding fresh, uncooked produce and fruits. Fruits, such as oranges, that have protective skins are safe. In particular, tap water in any form and especially ice should be avoided. Bottled beverages are recommended. The physician should be contacted prior to travel to Third World countries to obtain more information on prevention and treatment.
- Diseases - There are certain intestinal disorders that can cause chronic diarrhea. These include colitis, Crohn’s disease, diverticulosis, and even colon cancer. These are all serious diseases that require careful medical attention and treatment. It is a major reason why the cause of chronic diarrhea should always be known.
- Stress and Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) - IBS is a problem that occurs when the colon does not contract in a smooth, rhythmic manner. The contractions can be exaggerated in which case diarrhea occurs or they may be sluggish and result in constipation. Sometimes there is alternating

constipation and diarrhea. Emotional stress often aggravates these symptoms.

Diagnosis

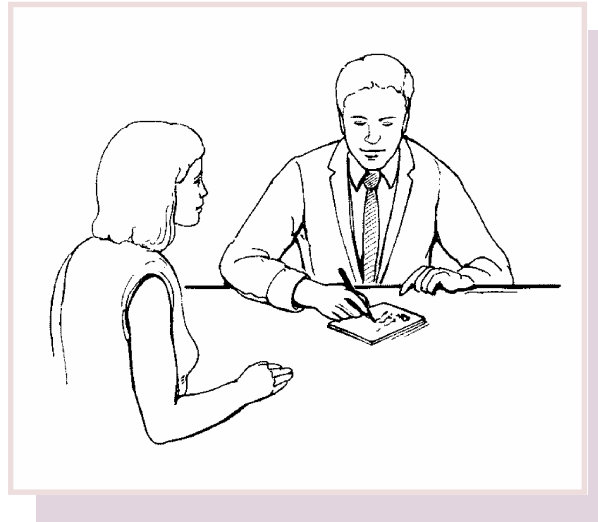
The discovery of the cause of diarrhea may be very simple, such as discontinuing magnesium-containing antacids. Or it may be more difficult. Testing of blood and stool may be needed. X-rays and ultrasound may also be necessary. In some cases, sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy are required to visually inspect the colon with a lighted, flexible tube. Testing depends on how severe and prolonged the condition is, and how the physician evaluated each case.

Treatment

There are simple things that can be done at the beginning of a diarrheal episode which may help reduce symptoms. Taking only liquids by mouth and avoiding solid foods and milk may be helpful. Over-the-counter constipating agents, such as Pepto-Bismol, Kaopectate, or Imodium can also be tried. For explosive or persistent diarrhea, treatment will obviously depend on the cause. Fortunately, the source of diarrhea can almost always be found and effective treatment is then usually available.

In Summary...

Diarrhea is a common problem which is usually not serious. If it is severe or persistent, a specific diagnosis should be sought. By working closely with the physician, effective treatment is almost always available.



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DIARRHEA



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