



Diarrhea

What it is:

Diarrhea is frequent bowel movements which may be soft, formed, loose, or watery. Diarrhea can occur at any time during radiation therapy.

Why it occurs:

Radiation therapy to the pelvis, stomach, and abdomen can cause diarrhea. People get diarrhea because radiation harms the healthy cells in the large and small bowels. These areas are very sensitive to the amount of radiation needed to treat cancer.

When you have diarrhea:

- **Drink 8 to 12 cups of clear liquid per day.** Ask for ["Clear Liquids"](#) handout for ideas of drinks and foods that are clear liquids.
 - If you drink liquids that are high in sugar (such as fruit juice, sweet iced tea, Kool-Aid®, or Hi-C®) consider mixing them with water.

- **Avoid caffeine.**
 - If you must have coffee/tea/soda limit yourself to 1 or 2 per day.
 - Foods or drinks with caffeine can include regular coffee, black tea, soda, and chocolate

- **Eat many small meals and snacks.** For instance, eat 5 or 6 small meals and snacks rather than 3 large meals.

- **Look over the Low Fiber/Low Residue Diet handout.**
 - If you have been eating a sizeable amount of items listed in the "Foods to Avoid" then cut back on those and choose like items under "Foods to Choose."

- **General diet tips:**
 - Avoid foods made with seeds, nuts, or raw or dried fruit, popcorn, and coconut.
 - Limit milk and milk products to 2 cups daily.
 - Avoid whole-grain breads and cereals.
 - Do not eat RAW fruits and vegetables. Use canned or well cooked products.
 - Avoid tough, fibrous meats with gristle.
 - Limit highly seasoned or fatty food.
 - Avoid spicy foods, such as hot sauce, salsa, chili, and curry dishes
 - Avoid fried or greasy foods
 - Avoid foods or drinks that cause gas, such as cooked dried beans, cabbage, broccoli, soy milk, and other soy products

- **Eat foods that are easy on the stomach** (which means foods that are low in fiber, fat, and lactose). If your diarrhea is severe, your doctor or nurse may suggest the BRAT diet, which stands for bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast.
- **Take care of your rectal area.**
 - Be sure to tell your doctor or nurse if your rectal area gets sore.
 - Instead of toilet paper, use a baby wipe or squirt of water from a spray bottle to clean yourself after bowel movements.
 - When cleaning the anal area, use a mild soap, and pat the area dry rather than rubbing.
 - If you develop soreness in the rectum/anus
 - You can try medicated wipes (also known as witch hazel pads or Tucks medicated pads, which are available over the counter)
 - Consider taking sitz baths. A sitz bath is simply a bath where you sit in warm water that covers the buttocks and hips for several minutes. Sitz baths can be taken in a normal bath tub or basin, or special basins can be purchased that fit into a toilet bowl.
 - Protective ointments or sprays can be applied to the anal area to help minimize irritation. Aquaphor is an over-the-counter ointment that can be used, and 3M cavilon spray is an over-the-counter spray that can be used.
- If you are having more than 3 loose bowel movements per day, then **Imodium (Loperamide)**, which is available over the counter, can be used. Take 1 tablet after each loose bowel movement, up to 8 tablets per day. Notify your doctor if you start taking Imodium.
- **Talk to your doctor or nurse.** Tell them if you are having diarrhea. He or she will suggest ways to manage it.

To learn more about dealing with diarrhea during cancer treatment, see [Eating Hints](#), a book from the National Cancer Institute. You can get a free copy at <https://pubs.cancer.gov/ncip> or 1-800-4-CANCER.