

DIARRHEA

PERSONAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

What is Diarrhea?

Diarrhea is the frequent passage of loose, watery stools. Diarrhea is often accompanied by other symptoms including nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, headache and fever. Diarrhea can affect the ability of the body to process and absorb necessary water, salts and nutrients and can lead to dehydration. Diarrhea can be caused by a variety of viruses, bacteria and parasites. It can also occur in association with other infectious diseases, chemical agents, antibiotic use, food allergies or change in dietary habits.

How is it spread?

Diarrhea can be spread by ingesting food or water contaminated with bacteria, viruses or parasites. This occurs when a person accidentally puts something that is contaminated with the feces of an infected person in or around his mouth (fecal-oral transmission). Person to person transmission occurs in families, child care centers and institutions.

How is it treated?

The key to treating diarrhea is to determine its cause. Diarrhea caused by an infection can often be treated with antibiotics. However, the correct diagnosis must be made so the proper medication can be prescribed. When the cause of diarrhea has not been determined, it is important to prevent dehydration. Serious problems can occur if the body's proper fluid levels are not maintained. Many oral rehydration solutions and antidiarrheal products are available over-the-counter. Check with your health care provider to determine the appropriate treatment for you.

How can we prevent diarrhea?

- Careful and frequent hand washing with soap and water after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before eating and handling food.
- Adults should assist children with hand washing after using the bathroom, and before eating snacks and meals.
- Disinfect bathrooms, toys and food preparation surfaces frequently, especially if there is a sick family member in the home.
- Wash fruits and vegetables well and cook food thoroughly.
- Do not drink water from lakes, rivers or streams unless it has been properly purified.

When should you call a doctor?

- High fever (101.5 oral)
- Blood in bowel movement
- Prolonged vomiting that prevents keeping liquids down (can lead to dehydration)

Signs of dehydration:

- decrease in urination
- sunken eyes
- extreme thirst
- unusual drowsiness
- dry mouth, cracked lips

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