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## What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is the rapid passage of stool through the intestines. Some people refer to diarrhea as “the runs”, loose BMs, “problems with my bowels” and loose stools. Anyone can have mild to severe diarrhea. You may also experience other symptoms like:

- Cramping
- Uncontrollable urges to go to the bathroom
- Bloating and gas

The chart inside describes symptoms you may experience when you have diarrhea. You may also use it as a guide for when to call your nurse or doctor.

## What are the reasons for having diarrhea?

Many things can cause diarrhea, including:

- Bacterial or viral infection
- Medication side effects
- Chemotherapy and radiation side effects
- Food and drink side effects
- Vitamins, minerals and sugar
- Cancer in the bowels
- Bowel surgery
- Constipation
- Stress and anxiety

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## How can I control diarrhea?

Ask your nurse or doctor for information on how to control your diarrhea. You may also want to read the booklet “Nutrition Management of Diarrhea”, which you can get from a Registered Dietitian or another member of your health care team.

## How serious is diarrhea?

Diarrhea can result in not getting enough water or food. This can be serious to your body and to your health, if it is not treated.

Untreated diarrhea can lead to:

- Being admitted into the hospital to get food and drink into your system
- Delaying your cancer treatment
- Lowering your chemotherapy dose or radiation therapy treatment
- Problems with your heart, kidneys and breathing
- Life threatening illness
- Death

## Contact information

If you have any concerns regarding diarrhea, call London Regional Cancer Program between 8:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. at 519-685-8600. Press option #3 to reach the telephone triage nurse. You may also call your family doctor.

## Feedback about this pamphlet?

Email: [lrcpeducation@lhsc.on.ca](mailto:lrcpeducation@lhsc.on.ca)

# Patient Information Diarrhea - When to Call for Help



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# Diarrhea – when to call for help

This chart describes symptoms you may experience when you have diarrhea. **Keep in mind your normal bowel movement habits when using this chart.** If you are not sure about your symptoms, call your nurse or doctor. They will review them with you and direct your medical care.

## Not Urgent

### Mild Diarrhea

- ✓ Less than 4 bowel movements a day
- ✓ Colostomy – less than 4 bowel movements a day
- ✓ Ileostomy – 1000mL or 4-6 pouch empties a day
- ✓ Bowel movement is mushy and watery with bits of food
- ✓ Some night time bowel movements that are controlled
- ✓ Some cramping
- ✓ Able to eat and drink
- ✓ Some nausea
- ✓ Able to urinate
- ✓ Urine colour light yellow

**DO**

Call physician or nurse to discuss.

## Urgent

### Moderate Diarrhea

- ✓ Between 4-7 bowel movements a day
- ✓ Colostomy – between 4-7 bowel movements a day
- ✓ Ileostomy – 1500mL or 6-9 pouch empties a day
- ✓ Bowel movement is watery with bits of food
- ✓ Accidental bowel movement during the day or night
- ✓ Increased cramping
- ✓ Eating less food and drink, lower appetite
- ✓ Frequent nausea
- ✓ Frequent vomiting
- ✓ Dry mouth and feeling thirsty
- ✓ Less able to urinate
- ✓ Urine colour is dark yellow or orange
- ✓ Skin around the anus is sore.

**DO**

Seek medical attention within the next 24 hours.

## Emergency

### Severe Diarrhea

- ✓ More than 7 bowel movements a day
- ✓ Colostomy – more than 7 bowel movements a day
- ✓ Ileostomy – 2000mL or more than 10 pouch empties a day
- ✓ Bowel movement is watery only
- ✓ No control of bowel movements
- ✓ Constant cramping
- ✓ Cannot eat or drink, no appetite
- ✓ Constant nausea
- ✓ Constant vomiting
- ✓ Dizziness, lightheaded
- ✓ Difficult to urinate
- ✓ Urine colour is dark orange or brown
- ✓ Bloody bowel movements
- ✓ Sudden abdominal bloating
- ✓ Severe abdominal pain
- ✓ Skin around the anus is bloody
- ✓ Skin feels very warm
- ✓ Fever greater than 38°C or 100.4°F

**DO**

Go to the nearest hospital emergency and get **immediate** medical attention.