

Diarrhea

Diarrhea is when the consistency of bowel movements (stool) becomes watery, not necessarily the number of bowel movements per day. Diarrhea can be distressing because it reflects loss of control of body function, interferes with other activities, and may lead to skin breakdown. Abdominal cramping and bloating may accompany diarrhea. It may also be painless, particularly if it is a result of stress.

The digestive process

Your digestive system is one continuous tube that breaks down food products, absorbs nutrients, and eliminates unusable waste in a step-by-step process. The digestive system begins at the mouth and ends at the rectum.

The upper digestive system

In the upper digestive system, chewing softens and breaks up the food into small particles so it can pass down through the esophagus to the stomach. In the stomach, the food is further broken down before moving to the lower digestive system, where food is converted into energy sources.

The lower digestive system

In the small intestine, food is broken down into nutrients and absorbed through the intestinal wall into the bloodstream. By the time food passes through the more than 20 feet of the small intestine and reaches the large bowel (colon), most of the nutrients have been absorbed and waste products (stool) are left. It is the job of the colon to absorb excess water from the waste and move it to the rectum so it can be expelled. Changes in the colon's natural contractions or rhythms cause waste material to either move too slowly and become hard and dry (constipation), or move too rapidly and become soft and watery (diarrhea).

Treatment

- Increase oral fluids. Gatorade is recommended. Avoid beverages containing caffeine or alcohol.

Food intake:

- Withhold food for 24 hours for severe diarrhea.
- Restart diet with low-fiber, high-protein, high-carbohydrate foods, preferably cooked.
- Take small frequent feedings until diarrhea is stabilized.

Anti-diarrheal medications:

- Imodium
- Lomotil
- Pepto-Bismol is good for traveler's diarrhea, but turns stools black.
- Antibiotics may be prescribed for infectious diarrhea.

Comfort measures:

- Provide personal hygiene after each stool.
- Keep rectal area clean and dry to prevent skin breakdown.
- Sitz baths (warm soapy baths) three times daily may be helpful.
- A protective ointment (like zinc oxide) on rectal area may prevent skin breakdown.

