

DIARRHOEA

Diarrhoea is passing watery stools (poo), usually 3 or more times in 24 hours.

Diarrhoea can start suddenly and can last for as long as 4 weeks. As well as watery poo, you may have cramping tummy pains. In some people, these pains get better each time they poo. You may be sick (vomiting), have a high temperature (fever), a headache and aching arms and legs.

In most cases diarrhoea gets better within a few days. If you have diarrhoea and you are vomiting, the vomiting will usually last for 1 day or so, although the diarrhoea will often carry on for longer.

Diarrhoea and vomiting can cause dehydration. Symptoms of dehydration can include: weeing less, dry mouth, feeling or appearing weak, tired, dizzy or light-headed or confused, muscle cramps and pains, breathing fast, having cold hands or feet and skin that doesn't go back to its normal shape quickly when it is pinched gently and let go.

Diarrhoea is usually caused by bacteria or viruses infecting your gut. They may come from food (food poisoning), water, or from another person. Bacteria and viruses spread easily between people, for example, when an infected person shares a towel or prepares food for other people.

Some medicines can cause diarrhoea. These include: antibiotics, antacids containing magnesium, laxatives, medicines used to treat cancer, anti-inflammatory painkillers, medicines for depression called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), and cholesterol-lowering medicines called statins.

You may also get diarrhoea if you are anxious, have food allergies or appendicitis. Some gut problems such as irritable bowel syndrome can begin with diarrhoea.

How can I treat diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea will usually get better on its own. It is important for you to drink enough to replace all the fluid you have lost. See your doctor if you become dehydrated.

For babies:

- Continue to breastfeed or bottle feed as usual. Let your baby feed more often if they want to. You can also give your baby water to drink between feeds.
- If your baby vomits, wait for 5 to 10 minutes before giving them more to drink, but give it slowly, for example, a spoonful (or syringe) every 2 to 3 minutes.

For children:

- Let your child eat and drink as usual, but don't give them undiluted fruit juice and fizzy drinks. Encourage them to drink extra water or diluted fruit juice.
- If your child vomits, wait for 5 to 10 minutes before you start giving them drinks again but give them slowly, for example, sips every 2 to 3 minutes.
- If your child is dehydrated, give them diluted fruit juice or keep giving them water.

For adults:

- Drink plenty of water, diluted fruit juice or soup broth (especially if you are thirsty) until the diarrhoea goes.
- Drink 1 cup of liquid (200ml) after each watery poo as well as the drinks you usually have each day. If you are dehydrated you will need to drink more.
- If you vomit, keep taking small sips of water or another liquid until symptoms have settled.

What else can help?

If you have a high temperature, take some paracetamol to bring it down. If your child has a high temperature, give them paracetamol at the right dose for their age and leave 4 to 6 hours before giving them another dose. Do not give them more than 4 doses in 24 hours.

Some people are more at risk of dehydration these include the frail, older people, children and people with certain medical conditions. You may buy oral rehydration sachets from your pharmacy, these contain salts, sugar and minerals. They can be taken alongside your usual diet.

Some medicines can make you more likely to become dehydrated when you have diarrhoea. Other medicines may not work as well as usual. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you are taking other medicines and have diarrhoea.

Do I need to see my doctor?

Contact your doctor if you or your child's symptoms are not settling after 3 to 4 days.

For babies:

Contact your doctor or health visitor urgently if your baby has had 6 or more episodes of diarrhoea in the past 24 hours, or if they have vomited 3 times or more in the past 24 hours. Or, if your baby is dehydrated, that is, they are drowsy, have pale or blotchy skin, cold hands or feet, not many wet nappies, or are breathing fast.

For children:

Contact your doctor if your child has:

- had 6 or more episodes of diarrhoea in the past 24 hours
- vomited 3 times or more in the past 24 hours
- been sick and can't keep fluids down
- has a high temperature that cannot be brought down (38°C and over if they are less than 3 months old or 39°C and over if they are 3 to 6 months old)
- symptoms that are getting worse quickly

- severe or long-lasting tummy pain
- blood in their poo
- very watery poo
- symptoms of dehydration
- a medical condition such as heart disease, kidney disease or diabetes
- recently been abroad.

For adults

Contact your doctor if you:

- have lost a lot of weight
- have severe or long-lasting tummy pain
- have blood in your poo
- your poo is dark or black
- have symptoms at night and it stops you sleeping
- have very watery poo
- are being sick and can't keep fluids down
- feel dehydrated
- have recently been abroad
- are over 60 and have had a recent change in bowel habit
- are pregnant
- have a weakened immune system from cancer therapy, steroid therapy or other medicines or conditions
- have taken antibiotics or been in hospital in the last 8 weeks.

Can I give diarrhoea to other people?

Yes, sometimes the bacteria and viruses that cause diarrhoea are passed easily from one person to another.

If you have diarrhoea:

- wash your hands thoroughly after using the toilet. Use a liquid soap and warm, running water. Dry your hands thoroughly.
- don't share towels or flannels
- don't prepare food or serve it to other people
- clean your toilet regularly. Wipe the flush handle, door handle, toilet seat, taps, and surfaces with hot water and cleaning products at least once a day. Use a disposable cloth or one that is just for cleaning the toilet.
- stay off work, school or nursery for at least 48 hours after the last time you had watery poo or were sick.

Where can I find further information?

NHS Direct Wales: www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

NHS Direct Wales Tel: 0845 4647 (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Calls from landlines and mobiles cost 2p per minute, in addition to telephone providers access charge.