



Diarrhoea and Cancer

Information for Patients and Carers

What is diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea is 'the passage of three or more loose or liquid stools a day or more than your normal'. The Bristol Stool Chart is a recognised pictorial diagram used in healthcare that you can use to classify your stools. Type 5, type 6 and type 7 may indicate diarrhoea.

Why might I be having diarrhoea?

There are many reasons why you may have diarrhoea. The management and treatment of it usually depends on the cause. It is therefore useful to know the reason for your diarrhoea.

Diarrhoea can occur due to the cancer itself or as a result of damage or irritation to the digestive tract caused by some cancer treatments. Other reasons include:

- Side effects of medication i.e. antibiotics, laxatives
- Constipation overflow
- Infection
- Malabsorption

You may be asked to provide a stool sample to check for any infection.

How can I manage diarrhoea?

Keep a food and symptom diary

This can help to identify food and drinks that are troublesome for you. You may wish to avoid these foods to see if this helps. If you don't notice an improvement with avoiding certain food and drinks, try reintroducing these back in to your diet. It is important to have a varied diet to make sure you get everything you need. Avoiding certain food and drinks long-term unnecessarily is not recommended.

You can find details on a balanced diet here: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/food-and-nutrition/eating-well/eatwell-guide-how-to-eat-a-healthy-balanced-diet>

Bristol Stool Chart

Type 1		Separate hard lumps, like nuts (hard to pass)
Type 2		Sausage-shaped but lumpy
Type 3		Like a sausage but with cracks on the surface
Type 4		Like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft
Type 5		Soft blobs with clear-cut edges
Type 6		Fluffy pieces with ragged edges, a mushy stool
Type 7		Watery, no solid pieces. Entirely Liquid

First published: Lewis SJ, Heaton KW (1997) Stool form scale as a useful guide to intestinal transit time. Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology 32: 920-4

Keep yourself hydrated

It is important that you continue to eat and drink to keep yourself nourished and hydrated. Your body will lose a lot of water and salts if you have diarrhoea and you may be at risk of becoming dehydrated.

Water, tea, coffee, milk, yoghurt drinks, fruit juice, soda, diluting juice, Bovril and Oxo all count towards your body's fluid intake. It can help to include drinks other than water to replace the salts.

Sip fluid throughout the day and if you are going out take a drink with you.

Avoid or limit irritants

These are food and drinks that are known to irritate the digestive tract. These can make your symptoms worse.

Irritants include:	
• Alcohol	If you drink alcohol, you can find more information about the low risk drinking guidelines at: www.drinkaware.co.uk
• Smoking	If you smoke, help to stop can be found at https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/stopping-smoking
• Carbonated drinks	Soda water, fizzy drinks, ginger beer, sparkling alcoholic drinks i.e. Champagne, prosecco
• Spices or spicy food	Chilli, chilli powder , curry pastes
• Caffeine	Coffee
• Sorbitol found in:	Some dried fruits Sugar-free boiled sweets Chewing gum and mints Fizzy drinks

What about medication?

Continue to take any medication as prescribed, even if you think these are contributing to your loose stools, for example, antibiotics.

Anti-diarrhoeal medication can help your symptoms. Speak to your healthcare team if you do not have medication to help your symptoms, to discuss changes to current medications, or if your symptoms persist despite medication.



What about fibre?

As part of a healthy balanced diet the general population is encouraged to eat 30g fibre per day. This can be difficult to achieve particularly if you have a poor appetite.

If you are adding fibre to your diet, do it gradually introducing 1-2 changes every few days. This will help your bowel adjust and avoid bloating and excess gas.

Higher fibre alternative	Lower fibre alternative
Seeded or wholemeal bread or bread products, pitta, wraps, roti	White bread, white rolls, white pitta bread, white wrap, crumpet, pancake
Oatcakes, crispbread, rice cakes, popcorn	Cream crackers, breadsticks, rice cakes, crisps, biscuits
Bran flakes, porridge oats, muesli, wholegrain cereal Tip: mix your regular cereal with a higher fibre alternative to introduce the fibre gradually	Refined breakfast cereals i.e. Corn or rice based cereals
Wholemeal pasta, quinoa, bulgar wheat, brown rice, millet, rye, barley, maize, wholewheat noodles	White pasta, white rice, basmati rice, noodles
Wholemeal pasta, quinoa	
Baked potato or boiled potato (skin on), sweet potato or yam	Mashed potato/boiled or baked potato (without skin)
Nuts, seeds	Ground nuts
Lentils, kidney beans, yellow-split peas, baked beans, chickpeas	Skinned chicken, white fish, hard boiled egg, scrambled egg
Fruit juice (with pulp/with bits)	Fruit juice (without pulp/without bits), diluting juice
Orange, satsuma, apple, kiwi fruit with seeds, watermelon, pineapple, dried apricots, raisins, prunes	Skinless or tinned fruit i.e. apple, peach, pear, galia melon, banana
Raw vegetables, peas, sweetcorn	Well-cooked or skinless fruit and vegetables i.e. carrot, broccoli or grated veg

What about fat?

A diet high in fat can contribute to diarrhoea. It may be worth considering reducing your intake or avoiding the following obvious sources of high-fat foods in the short-term:

- o Batter
- o Pastries
- o Fried foods i.e. bacon, egg, sausages
- o Takeaways
- o Oily curries

For more information on how to include fibre in your diet visit <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/fibre.html> or <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/healthyliving/basics/fibre.html>

Some people find reducing the fibre content of their diet, when they have symptoms of diarrhoea can help. As a starting point see below for examples of higher and lower fibre containing foods.

Pancreatic exocrine insufficiency (PEI) can lead to malabsorption of fat and result in diarrhoea. There are effective treatments for this if this is the reason for your diarrhoea.

Following a 'low fat' diet without medical reason is not recommended when you have cancer. This can accelerate weight loss and mean that you miss out on vital nutrients. Visit <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/food-and-nutrition/eating-well/eatwell-guide-how-to-eat-a-healthy-balanced-diet> . For more information on a healthy balanced diet visit: www.nhsinform

What about lactose?

Chemotherapy damages healthy gut cells. Lactose intolerance can occur as a result of chemotherapy. This normally resolves when you stop chemotherapy treatment. Following a lactose free diet during your treatment can help. If you choose to follow a lactose-free diet for the duration of your treatment please read the advice here to make sure you get the calcium that your body needs: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/nutritional/lactose-intolerance#treating-lactose-intolerance>

If you are having radiotherapy treatment, current evidence does not support following a lactose-free diet unless you have been diagnosed with lactose intolerance.

What about probiotics?

Taking probiotics is not recommended for someone with cancer.

Cancer and cancer treatment can reduce your ability to fight infection. Probiotics contain live bacteria and so consuming probiotics with having a weakened immune system can increase your risk of developing an infection.

Probiotics have in some cases been found to limit the length of time you have diarrhoea for and there is evidence to support their use in those with irritable bowel syndrome, however taking probiotics is not recommended for someone with cancer. To find out more about probiotics check out the British Dietetic Association fact sheet: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/probiotics.html>

What if I have had radiotherapy to my pelvic area?

If you have diarrhoea as a result of radiotherapy treatment the evidence no longer suggests that restricting your fibre intake will help.

Continue to eat as you usually would do. If you have diarrhoea consider your fluid intake, avoid known irritants and discuss a change to medication with your healthcare team if you need to.

You may also wish to discuss whether antispasmodic medication could help to improve your symptoms.

If your symptoms continue consider asking for a referral to a dietitian.

What if I have had immunotherapy?

If you have diarrhoea as a result of immunotherapy you are recommended to follow the advice overleaf. This includes keeping yourself hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids and avoiding food and drinks that are known to irritate the gut. Discuss medication with your healthcare team.

If your diarrhoea is associated with colitis, your healthcare team will manage this. You may also benefit from a referral to a dietitian.

What if I have an ileostomy or a colostomy?

The information on this page is not suitable for you if you have a stoma. Speak to your healthcare team if you are looking for advice specific to eating and drinking with a stoma.