

Diarrhoea: acute diarrhoea in adults

What is diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea is the passage of many loose, watery, offensive bowel movements. It is a symptom, not a disease. It is usually associated with colic-type abdominal pain and vomiting. It invariably is a self-limiting problem.

What causes it?

Diarrhoea usually is caused by a viral or a bacterial infection. Most episodes last for such a short time that a search for the cause is not necessary. However, if it lasts for 12 hours or longer, medical attention is needed. If it is associated with fever and the passage of blood and mucus—it requires close attention.

Uncommon infections to be excluded are typhoid and food poisoning as well as parasite infestations with *Giardia lamblia* and amoebae. If you have diarrhoea on returning from overseas, it must be checked out. *Giardia lamblia* infection produces ongoing abdominal cramps, flatulence and bubbly foul-smelling diarrhoea. It is often misdiagnosed.

Other possible causes are acute appendicitis, rich food, alcohol, emotional upset and excess vitamin C.

What is the treatment?

Rest

Your bowel needs a rest and so do you. It is best to reduce your normal activities until the diarrhoea has stopped.

Diet

It is vital that you starve but drink small amounts of clear fluids such as water, tea, lemonade and yeast extract (e.g.

Marmite) until the diarrhoea settles. Then eat low-fat foods such as stewed apples, rice (boiled in water), soups, poultry, boiled potatoes, mashed vegetables, dry toast or bread, biscuits, most canned fruits, jam, honey, jelly, dried skim milk or condensed milk (reconstituted with water).

Avoid alcohol, coffee, strong tea, fatty foods, fried foods, spicy foods, raw vegetables, raw fruit (especially with hard skins), Chinese food, whole-grain cereals and cigarette smoking.

On the third day introduce dairy produce such as a small amount of milk in tea or coffee and a little butter or margarine on toast. Add also grilled lean meat and fish (either grilled or steamed).

Medication

Diarrhoea usually settles without the need for medicine. If it is socially embarrassing, kaolin-based preparations can help.

Antibiotics should be avoided unless directed by your doctor.

