

# Health Tips

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## Health Tip: Help for Acute Diarrhea

Diarrhea is defined as loose, watery, and frequent stool. Depending on the underlying cause, diarrhea can be either acute or chronic. Acute diarrhea is usually related to a bacterial, viral, or parasitic infection. "Stomach flu", traveler's diarrhea, and "food poisoning" are all examples of acute forms of diarrhea. Of these, "stomach flu", more accurately termed viral gastroenteritis, is the most common. Rotavirus, Norwalk virus, and enteric adenovirus are some of the most common viral causes for gastroenteritis. Viral gastroenteritis typically occurs in epidemics, affecting schools, workplaces, and families.

**Acute vs. Chronic Diarrhea.** Diarrhea lasting for more than 2 weeks is considered to be persistent or chronic. Chronic diarrhea is usually found in association with medical conditions such as celiac disease (gluten sensitivity), irritable bowel syndrome, lactose intolerance, or with a parasitic infection (e.g. Giardia). In most instances, diarrhea lasting more than 2 weeks requires evaluation by a physician. This can include taking stool samples for microscopic assessment and endoscopy (inserting a tube into the mouth or rectum to look at the intestine from the inside).

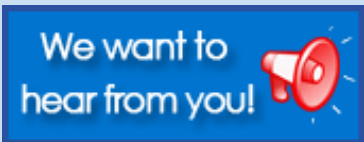


**Symptoms of acute diarrhea.** In addition to diarrhea, viral gastroenteritis is usually accompanied by nausea, vomiting, and abdominal cramping. Diarrhea that is due to a bacterial infection, such as Salmonella or Shigella, may cause fever or bloody stools. The development of dehydration is one of the most serious complications related to diarrhea. This is particularly true in children and older individuals, who tolerate fluid and electrolyte losses poorly. Features of dehydration include thirst, decreased frequency of urination, dark-colored urine, and light-headedness. In infants, signs of dehydration include

dry mouth and tongue, a sunken fontanelle (soft spot), absence of tears when crying, sunken eyes or cheeks, listlessness, skin that "tents" (does not flatten when pinched and released), and a decreased frequency of wet diapers.

**Self-care of acute diarrhea:** In adults, diarrhea from viral gastroenteritis typically goes away on its own in a few days. Treatment with medications is usually not necessary, but the following measures may help speed one's recovery:

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- Drink as much fluid as can be tolerated to avoid becoming dehydrated. Drink small amounts of fluid (4-6 oz.) every 30-60 minutes, rather than trying to force large amounts at one time.
- It is best to avoid caffeinated beverages, fruit juice, sodas, or milk products. Older children and adults can drink sports beverages such as Gatorade.
- Probiotics (active cultures of beneficial bacteria) often makes diarrhea less severe and shortens its duration. Probiotics are available in yogurt as well as in supplement form.
- "Bland foods" like rice, dry toast, and bananas are some of the best tolerated foods with diarrhea.
- Over-the-counter anti-diarrhea medications (e.g. Immodium-AD) are best avoided with mild-to-moderate diarrhea. Diarrhea is your body's way of getting rid of the agent (virus, contaminated food, etc.) that caused the problem.

**When to see the doctor.** Not all acute diarrhea is caused by viruses. For example, many cases of "food poisoning" are due to bacteria such as E.coli or campylobacter, and some cases of "traveler's diarrhea" may be caused by a parasite. These may result in a more severe or more persistent form of diarrhea, in which case a specialized treatment, e.g. antibiotics or intravenous fluids, may be necessary. Here's when you need to see the doctor:

- Bloody stools or black stools (which may indicate the presence of blood).
- Fever of 102 degrees F or higher.
- Severe abdominal pain or cramping, particularly if not relieved by a bowel movement.
- Persistent vomiting causing an inability to drink fluids (in an infant under 3 months you should call as soon as vomiting or diarrhea begins)
- Signs and symptoms of dehydration.
- Fever of 101 degrees F or higher.
- Diarrhea that does not get better in 5 days (2 days for an infant or child), or is getting progressively worse.



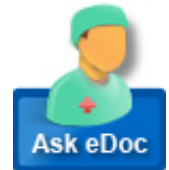
**Preventing Traveler's Diarrhea.** Traveler's diarrhea develops after consuming food or water that is contaminated with bacteria, viruses, or parasites. The following measures can help to prevent traveler's diarrhea:

- Do not drink tap water or use it to brush your teeth.
- Do not drink unpasteurized milk or dairy products.

- Do not use ice made from tap water.
- Avoid all raw fruits and vegetables, including lettuce and fruit salads, unless they can be peeled and you peel them yourself.
- Do not eat raw or rare meat and fish.
- Do not eat meat or shellfish that is not hot when served.
- Do not eat food from street vendors.

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11719 Hinson Road, Suite 130 Little Rock, Arkansas 72212

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