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Nutrition Nuggets

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Diarrhea – When You’re Losin’ It

Problems with loose bowels are very common in cancer patients during chemotherapy as well as many persons at end of life. This can rapidly cause electrolyte imbalance and dehydration if provision is not made to replace lost fluids and minerals.

There exist many dietary modifications that can reduce the symptoms and facilitate a return to normal bowel function. The number one issue is modifying the fiber content of the diet.

Fiber – Helpful and Harmful

Dietary fiber refers to plant cell wall components that are not digestible and can only be degraded by anaerobic bacteria in the large intestine. There are two types of dietary fiber, soluble and insoluble. Insoluble fiber is found in greatest quantities in wheat bran and flaxseed. It increases stool volume and shortens transit time or speeds the passage of food through your digestive tract.

Soluble fiber absorbs water and forms a gel, which slows down the passage of food. It’s absorbed from the small intestines and acts like a cardiovascular broom, sweeping the blood vessels clean, thereby reducing harmful LDL cholesterol and triglycerides.

Good sources of soluble fiber include:

oatmeal,
white rice,
white flour,
cream of wheat.

Fruits and vegetables - particularly bananas, canned fruit, carrots, potatoes, squash, beets, avocado, and okra.

psyllium seed (the main ingredient in many over-the-counter fiber supplements)

However, be cautious concerning the amount of fiber you take in. Excessive soluble fiber can result in gas, bloating, and constipation. Your physician is the best source of advice on fiber supplementation for diarrhea.

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Special Points of Interest:

- There are many modes of treatment.
- Soluble fiber can aid in resolution.
- Small meals of bland, easily digested foods are best.
- Probiotic yeast can resolve many types of acute and chronic diarrhea.
- Avoid sugary, spicy, gas-forming, and stimulant foods.
- Seek the aid of a qualified, health care professional.

Food You Can Use

Five or six small meals and snacks are easier on an unstable digestive system than three large meals. When diarrhea begins, reduce the insoluble fiber content of the diet to no more than 10 grams a day. Choose foods that contain no more than 2 grams of fiber per serving as stated on the nutrition facts label. This reduces intestinal motility, which helps the GI tract to rest and promotes healing.

A formula often prescribed for decreasing the frequency of bowel movements is the BRAT diet – bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast. Once diarrhea subsides, bland foods such as chicken, fish, eggs, pudding, potatoes (without skins), pasta, rice, yogurt, cottage cheese, hot cereal, smooth peanut butter, white bread, bananas, canned fruit and cooked vegetables can be gradually introduced. A bland diet is easy on the digestive tract and is usually well tolerated.



Bananas are soothing and stabilizing.

Gut – Friendly Bugs

Probiotics are bacterial strains that promote digestive health. The gastrointestinal tract is home to many billions of bacteria that perform a number of important functions including keeping the digestive system stable and functioning well.

Probiotic yeast was first isolated in 1923 by a French microbiologist, Henri Boulard. Dr. Boulard was intrigued when he observed the natives in Indochina using a tea brewed from the skins of litchi and mangosteen fruit to combat diarrhea resulting from a cholera epidemic.

Saccharomyces boulardii is a live yeast that is widely used to treat diarrhea resulting from multiple causes. It is naturally resistant to antibiotics and can accompany antibiotic therapy. It has no known interaction with pharmaceuticals except for antifungals, which will kill the organisms.

A few problematic conditions have been noted related to the use of *S. boulardii*:

- Persons with known allergies to baking yeast have reported itchiness and facial swelling.
- Alcoholic beverages must be avoided, as alcohol will kill the yeast.
- Systemic fungal infections occurred in two patients who had perforated colons. These were successfully treated with antifungal agents.
- There have been reports of opportunistic infections in severely immune compromised patients and in those with indwelling vascular catheters.

This probiotic yeast is generally used for short-term gastrointestinal support of three to four weeks or up to two weeks after diarrhea has resolved. The leading brand worldwide is Florastor which can be ordered without prescription from pharmacies. It must be stored under refrigeration to maintain potency.



Healing organism discovered from traditional folk medicine.

Tummy Troublers

There are a number of food items that can increase distress by irritating the digestive tract. It's best to avoid the following when experiencing diarrhea:

- Hard, raw fruits and vegetables
- Whole grain and high fiber foods such as bran cereals, brown rice, and whole wheat bread
- Foods containing seeds such as berries and popcorn
- Foods with skins like legumes, apples, and corn
- Stringy foods like pole beans and celery
- Milk products if lactose intolerance is suspected
- Caffeine, alcohol, and carbonated drinks
- Concentrated sources of sugar – sodas, candy, gum, desserts
- Spicy and highly seasoned foods
- Gas-forming vegetables – broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, collard greens, kale, and beans
- Chocolate can stimulate the bowels.

Fats and oils tend to make the bowels more sensitive and this can shorten transit time, worsening diarrhea. In addition, fat is harder to digest and this exacerbates the problem.

Seek Medical Advice

If you have persistent diarrhea and you're concerned about the possibility of having an accident away from home, talk to your doctor. He may be able to prescribe medication that can reduce the frequency of bowel movements.

If you're wondering whether a probiotic and/or a fiber supplement could relieve your diarrhea, consult your physician. He should be able to tell you whether either of these might be helpful, recommend the most effective, and give you guidance concerning the amount to take.

Call your doctor if you have any of the following:

- More than six loose bowel movements per day with no improvement in two days.
- Stools that have an unusual odor, color, or contain blood
- Inability to urinate for 12 hours or more
- Inability to drink fluids for more than two days
- Weight loss due to diarrhea
- Diarrhea after several days of constipation
- Dizziness or passing out
- Inability to drink more fluids than you're losing in bowel movements
- Severe abdominal pain



Hard, raw fruits and vegetables are too rough.



Your physician can develop a treatment plan for diarrhea.

For Further Information:

With selective diet and supplements, diarrhea can most often be controlled if not eliminated. Additionally, there are a number of medications that can reduce symptoms and bring a large measure of relief. Here are some additional resources for more information:

Diarrhea: Cancer-related causes and how to cope. (2008) [Online]. Available:
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/diarrhea/CA00040>

Diarrhea - Treatment. (2008) [Online]. Available:
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/gastrointestinalcomplications/Patient/page6>

Nutrition During Cancer Treatment - Diarrhea. (2008) [Online]. Available:
<http://oncolink.upenn.edu/coping/article.cfm?c=3&s=64&ss=158&id=959>

Low Fiber Diet for Diarrhea (2008) [Online]. Available:
<http://www.penncancer.org/pdf/education/Fiberdiarrhea%201.pdf>

Foods to Choose if You Have IBS With Diarrhea (2008). [Online]. Available :
<http://www.webmd.com/content/article/86/99288.htm>

Saccharomyces boulardi : a probiotic now used world-wide for gastrointestinal health (2008). [Online]. Available : <http://nybc.wordpress.com/2007/10/08/saccharomyces-boulardii-the-friendly-yeast/>

Saccharomyces boulardi (2008). [Online]. Available :
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saccharomyces_boulardii

Diarrhea, and the Experimental Treatment Saccharomyces boulardi (2008). [Online]. Available :
<http://www.aegis.com/default.asp?req=http://www.aegis.com/pubs/atn/1995/ATN22401.html>

Saccharomyces Boulardii, FAQs (2008). [Online]. Available :
<http://www.giprohealth.com/sboulardii.html>

