



National PANCREATIC CANCER *Canada* Foundation

Diarrhea

Diarrhea is a common side effect for many types of cancer including pancreatic. It can be caused by one of the following: increased intestinal secretions, decreased fluid absorption, excessive intestinal motility, or a combination of all three.

The source of diarrhea may stem from one of the following:

- Chemotherapy
- Radiation therapy to the lower abdomen
- Pancreatic enzyme insufficiency
- Medications
- Hormone-producing tumors
- Lactose intolerance
- Bacterial infection
- Damage to intestinal wall
- Inflammation or ulceration of the bowel

Diarrhea is generally described as abnormally frequent bowel movements that are more fluid than usual. Patients describe it based on their past and present experiences; therefore, what is normal for one person may be considered diarrhea to another.

People may experience different types of diarrhea. Clay colored stools are often a result of problems with or blockages of the biliary tract, which is the drainage system for the gallbladder, pancreas, and liver. Biliary tract obstructions are common for patients with pancreatic cancer. Floating stools often occur as a result of malabsorption of nutrients or changes in the diet such as increased fiber. Malabsorption is common side effect for patients with pancreatic cancer because the pancreas may not be able to produce or release enough enzymes to help with the digestion of food.

If a patient is experiencing diarrhea, it is recommended to keep a journal and write down the onset, frequency, duration, stool consistency, and self-care measures taken to control it. You can share this information with your doctor who can suggest a plan to manage it. Since diarrhea can cause dehydration, it may also be helpful to keep track of fluid intake.

One topic to discuss with the doctor may be the necessity of taking pancreatic enzymes with meals. Pancreatic enzymes break down carbohydrates, proteins, and fats from food. Additional enzymes may be needed if the levels of enzymes produced naturally by the pancreas are insufficient due to illness and/or a procedure. The doctor will prescribe the type, dosage, and administration schedule based on individual need, symptoms, and quantity of food intake.

Helpful tips if you are experiencing diarrhea:

- Eat 5-6 small meals a day
- Talk to a dietician about enzymes or anti-diarrhea medication
- Avoid or try to limit the amount of fatty, greasy or fried foods including high fat meats or cheeses, whole or 2% milk, rich desserts, many fast foods, and foods with added oil, butter, margarine, sour cream, cream cheese, or salad dressing.
- Limit your use of hot spices
- Eat fewer fruits or vegetables and choose juices instead. High intake of insoluble fiber food such as whole grain breads/cereals, raw fruits with thick peels, raw vegetables, and nuts can increase intestinal motility.
- Avoid gas-forming foods, including vegetables in the cabbage or onion family, dried beans, corn, popcorn, and chewing gum.
- Cut back your usage of carbonated beverages. It is suggested that they be left open for at least 10 minutes prior to drinking.
- Choose beverages that are decaffeinated versions of your favourite beverages including tea.
- Drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration. It is recommended to drink an additional cup of fluid after each bowel movement. Good choices include broth, jello and popsicles.
- Watery diarrhea may occur after eating foods high in sugar, like rich desserts, or if symptoms of high blood sugar are present. Symptoms of high blood sugar include increased thirst and urination.
- Keep a diary of your diet and bowel movements as it may identify trigger foods for you

Helpful hints for the Caregiver

- Peel fruits and vegetables
- Keep track of the amount of fluid they take each day
- Consult a doctor if they continue to vomit when taking fluids
- Stock snack foods such as crackers, applesauce, soups, Jello or drinks like Gatorade that will help replace lost sodium and potassium. Bananas can help replace lost potassium
- Use broths to flavour and moisten food
- Avoid deep frying foods

* A **Recommended Cookbook** is "Goes Down Easy" by Elise Mecklinger with the Princess Margaret Hospital Dieticians. It provides recipes to help you cope with the challenge of eating during cancer treatment. There are sections dedicated to dealing with diarrhea, nausea and loss of appetite.

* Please note: This information is not intended to be substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. If you are ill, or suspect that you are ill, see a doctor immediately