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Diarrhea

Also called: Dysentery, The runs, The trots

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is loose, watery stools (bowel movements). You have diarrhea if you have loose stools three or more times in one day. Acute diarrhea is diarrhea that lasts a short time. It is a common problem. It usually lasts about one or two days, but it may last longer. Then it goes away on its own.

Diarrhea lasting more than a few days may be a sign of a more serious problem. Chronic diarrhea -- diarrhea that lasts at least four weeks -- can be a symptom of a chronic disease. Chronic diarrhea symptoms may be continual, or they may come and go.

What causes diarrhea?

The most common causes of diarrhea include:

- Bacteria from contaminated food [<https://medlineplus.gov/foodborneillness.html>] or water
- Viruses such as the flu [<https://medlineplus.gov/flu.html>] , norovirus [<https://medlineplus.gov/norovirusinfections.html>] , or rotavirus [<https://medlineplus.gov/rotavirusinfections.html>] . Rotavirus is the most common cause of acute diarrhea in children.
- Parasites, which are tiny organisms found in contaminated food or water
- Medicines such as antibiotics, cancer drugs, and antacids that contain magnesium
- Food intolerances and sensitivities, which are problems digesting certain ingredients or foods. An example is lactose intolerance [<https://medlineplus.gov/lactoseintolerance.html>] .
- Diseases that affect the stomach, small intestine, or colon, such as Crohn's disease [<https://medlineplus.gov/crohnsdisease.html>]
- Problems with how the colon functions, such as irritable bowel syndrome [<https://medlineplus.gov/irritablebowelsyndrome.html>]

Some people also get diarrhea after stomach surgery, because sometimes the surgeries can cause food to move through your digestive system more quickly.

Sometimes no cause can be found. If your diarrhea goes away within a few days, finding the cause is usually not necessary.

Who is at risk for diarrhea?

People of all ages can get diarrhea. On average, adults in the United States have acute diarrhea once a year. Young children have it an average of twice a year.

People who visit developing countries are at risk for traveler's diarrhea [<https://medlineplus.gov/travelershealth.html>] . It is caused by consuming contaminated food or water.

What other symptoms might I have with diarrhea?

Other possible symptoms of diarrhea include:

- Cramps or pain in the abdomen
- An urgent need to use the bathroom
- Loss of bowel control

If a virus or bacteria is the cause of your diarrhea, you may also have a fever, chills, and bloody stools.

Diarrhea can cause dehydration [<https://medlineplus.gov/dehydration.html>] , which means that your body does not have enough fluid to work properly. Dehydration can be serious, especially for children, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems.

When do I need to see a health care provider for diarrhea?

Although it is usually not harmful, diarrhea can become dangerous or signal a more serious problem. Contact your health care provider if you have:

- Signs of dehydration
- Diarrhea for more than 2 days, if you are an adult. For children, contact the provider if it lasts more than 24 hours.
- Severe pain in your abdomen or rectum (for adults)
- A fever of 102 degrees or higher
- Stools containing blood or pus
- Stools that are black and tarry

If children have diarrhea, parents or caregivers should not hesitate to call a health care provider. Diarrhea can be especially dangerous in newborns and infants.

How is the cause of diarrhea diagnosed?

To find the cause of diarrhea, your health care provider may:

- Do a physical exam
- Ask about any medicines you are taking
- Test your stool or blood to look for bacteria, parasites, or other signs of disease or infection
- Ask you to stop eating certain foods to see whether your diarrhea goes away

If you have chronic diarrhea, your health care provider may perform other tests to look for signs of disease.

What are the treatments for diarrhea?

Diarrhea is treated by replacing lost fluids and electrolytes to prevent dehydration. Depending on the cause of the problem, you may need medicines to stop the diarrhea or treat an infection.

Adults with diarrhea should drink water, fruit juices, sports drinks, sodas without caffeine, and salty broths. As your symptoms improve, you can eat soft, bland food.

Children with diarrhea should be given oral rehydration solutions to replace lost fluids and electrolytes.

Can diarrhea be prevented?

Two types of diarrhea can be prevented - rotavirus diarrhea and traveler's diarrhea. There are vaccines for rotavirus. They are given to babies in two or three doses.


You can help prevent traveler's diarrhea by being careful about what you eat and drink when you are in developing countries:

- Use only bottled or purified water for drinking, making ice cubes, and brushing your teeth
- If you do use tap water, boil it or use iodine tablets
- Make sure that the cooked food you eat is fully cooked and served hot

- Avoid unwashed or unpeeled raw fruits and vegetables

NIH: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

Start Here

- Diarrhea [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/diarrhea>]  (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/informacion-de-la-salud/enfermedades-digestivas/diarrea>]
- Diarrheal Diseases - Acute and Chronic [<https://gi.org/topics/diarrhea-acute-and-chronic/>]
(American College of Gastroenterology)



Diagnosis and Tests

- Bacteria Culture Test [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/bacteria-culture-test/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/prueba-de-cultivo-de-bacterias/>]
- C. Diff Testing [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/c-diff-testing/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/pruebas-de-c-dificile/>]
- Calprotectin Stool Test [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/calprotectin-stool-test/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/prueba-de-calprotectina-fecal/>]
- Colonoscopy: MedlinePlus Health Topic [<https://medlineplus.gov/colonoscopy.html>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/colonoscopy.html>]
- Lower GI X-Ray (Barium Enema) [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/en/info/lowergi>]
(American College of Radiology; Radiological Society of North America)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.radiologyinfo.org/es/info/lowergi>]
- Ova and Parasite Test [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/ova-and-parasite-test/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/prueba-de-huevos-y-parasitos/>]
- White Blood Cell (WBC) in Stool [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/white-blood-cell-wbc-in-stool/>]
 (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/globulos-blancos-en-las-heces/>]



Prevention and Risk Factors

- Preventing Diarrheal Illnesses (Healthy Swimming) [<https://www.cdc.gov/healthy-swimming/prevention/preventing-diarrheal-illnesses.html>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Water Disinfection for Travelers [<https://www.cdc.gov/yellow-book/hcp/preparing-international-travelers/water-disinfection-for-travelers.html>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Treatments and Therapies

- 5 Things to Know about Probiotics [<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/tips/things-to-know-about-probiotics>]  (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health)
- Anti-Diarrheal Medicines: OTC Relief for Diarrhea [<https://familydoctor.org/antidiarrheal-medicines-otc-relief-for-diarrhea/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/medicamentos-antidiarreicos-de-venta-libre/?adfree=true>]
- Chamomile [<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/chamomile>]  (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health)
- Diet Strategies for Managing Chronic Diarrhea [<https://iffgd.org/gi-disorders/diarrhea/nutrition-strategies/>]
(International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders)
- Self-Care for Vomiting and Diarrhea [<https://www.veteranshealthlibrary.va.gov/3,84639>] (Department of Veterans Affairs)




Related Issues

- Bowel Control Problems (Fecal Incontinence) [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/bowel-control-problems-fecal-incontinence>]  (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/informacion-de-la-salud/enfermedades-digestivas/incontinencia-fecal>]
- Chronic Diarrhea: A Concern after Gallbladder Removal? [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/cholecystectomy/expert-answers/gallbladder-removal/FAQ-20058481?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/tests-procedures/cholecystectomy/expert-answers/gallbladder-removal/faq-20058481?p=1>]
- Diarrhea: Cancer-Related Causes and How to Cope [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/cancer/in-depth/diarrhea/ART-20044799?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/cancer/in-depth/diarrhea/art-20044799?p=1>]
- Viral Gastroenteritis ("Stomach Flu") [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/viral-gastroenteritis>]  (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/informacion-de-la-salud/enfermedades-digestivas/gastroenteritis-viral>]

Specifics

- Antibiotic-Associated Diarrhea [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/antibiotic-associated-diarrhea/symptoms-causes/syc-20352231?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/antibiotic-associated-diarrhea/symptoms-causes/syc-20352231?p=1>]
- Traveler's Diarrhea [<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/travelers-diarrhea>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
Also in Spanish [<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/travelers-diarrhea-es>]

Genetics

- Congenital sucrase-isomaltase deficiency: MedlinePlus Genetics [<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/congenital-sucrase-isomaltase-deficiency>]  (National Library of Medicine)
- Microvillus inclusion disease: MedlinePlus Genetics [<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/microvillus-inclusion-disease>]  (National Library of Medicine)
- Trichohepatoenteric syndrome: MedlinePlus Genetics [<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/trichohepatoenteric-syndrome>]  (National Library of Medicine)



Health Check Tools

- Diarrhea [<https://familydoctor.org/symptom/diarrhea/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/sintoma/diarrea/?adfree=true>]

Test Your Knowledge

- Test Your Knowledge About Diarrhea in Kids [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/quiz/000121_48.htm] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/quiz/000121_103.htm]

Clinical Trials

- ClinicalTrials.gov: Diarrhea [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Diarrhea%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)
- ClinicalTrials.gov: Dysentery [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Dysentery%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)



Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)


- Article: Personalized azithromycin treatment rules for children with watery diarrhea using machine... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40592849>]

- Article: Determinants of post-discharge stunting among diarrhoeal children aged 2-23 months in...
[<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40576116>]
- Article: Effect of *Limosilactobacillus reuteri* DSM17938 to prevent antibiotic-associated diarrhea in children:...
[<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40488914>]
- Diarrhea -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Diarrhea%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bedat%5D+AND+%28patient+education+handout%5Bpt%5D+OR+guideline%5Bpt%5D+OR+clinical+trial%5Bpt%5D%29++NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]

Find an Expert

- Find a Gastroenterologist (GI Doctor) [<https://gi.org/patients/find-a-gastroenterologist/>] (American College of Gastroenterology)
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/>] 
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov>] 

Children

- Chronic Diarrhea in Children [<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/chronic-diarrhea-children>]  (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases)
- Collecting a Stool Sample for Testing (For Parents) [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/stool-tests-done.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/stool-tests-done.html>]
- Diarrhea (For Parents) [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/diarrhea.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/diarrhea.html>]
- Stool Tests (For Parents) [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/labtest8.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/labtest8.html>]
- Vomiting and Diarrhea [<https://familydoctor.org/condition/vomiting-and-diarrhea/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/condicion/vomitos-y-diarrea-es/?adfree=true>]
- Your Child's Vaccines: Rotavirus Vaccine (RV) [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/rotavirus-vaccine.html>] (Nemours Foundation)

Teenagers

- Diarrhea [<https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/diarrhea.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/teens/diarrhea.html>]

Older Adults

- Caregiver Guide: Diarrhea [<https://www.healthinaging.org/tools-and-tips/caregiver-guide-diarrhea>] (AGS Health in Aging Foundation)

Patient Handouts

- Clear liquid diet [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000205.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000205.htm>]
- Diarrhea [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003126.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003126.htm>]
- Diarrhea in infants [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000691.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000691.htm>]
- Fecal culture [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003758.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003758.htm>]
- Traveler's diarrhea diet [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002433.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)

Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/002433.htm>]

- When you have diarrhea [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000121.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000121.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Clear liquid diet [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000205.htm>]

Diarrhea [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003126.htm>]

Diarrhea - what to ask your doctor - adult [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000218.htm>]

Diarrhea - what to ask your doctor - child [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000219.htm>]

Diarrhea in infants [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000691.htm>]

Enteroscopy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003889.htm>]

Fecal culture [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003758.htm>]

Fecal smear [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003755.htm>]

Traveler's diarrhea diet [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002433.htm>]

When you have diarrhea [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000121.htm>]

When your child has diarrhea [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000693.htm>]

Related Health Topics

C. diff Infections [<https://medlineplus.gov/cdiffinfections.html>]

Foodborne Illness [<https://medlineplus.gov/foodborneillness.html>]

Gastroenteritis [<https://medlineplus.gov/gastroenteritis.html>]

Rotavirus Infections [<https://medlineplus.gov/rotavirusinfections.html>]

Traveler's Health [<https://medlineplus.gov/travelershealth.html>]

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Diarrhea* is the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/>]

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