

Acute Diarrhea in Adults: What You Should Know

What is acute diarrhea?

Acute diarrhea is three or more watery or loose stools per day for less than 14 days.

What causes it?

It is most often caused by viruses. It is sometimes caused by bacteria, usually from eating food that is not cooked well or not washed properly.

When do I need to see a doctor for diarrhea?

Diarrhea usually goes away on its own within a week. You should call your doctor if you have any of the following:

- Fever (100.4°F or higher)
- Bloody diarrhea
- More than 10 stools per day or a feeling of always needing to go to the bathroom
- Signs of dehydration, including dry mouth, no tears, less need to urinate, or feeling faint
- Recent travel outside the country
- Pregnancy
- Weak immune system (for example, from chemotherapy, uncontrolled diabetes, or HIV)

- Recent stay in a hospital
- Recent antibiotic use
- Symptoms lasting for more than seven days

How is it treated?

The best way to treat diarrhea is to prevent dehydration by drinking fluids and continuing to eat normally. An oral rehydration solution can be made at home using the following recipe: 1/2 teaspoon of salt, 6 teaspoons of sugar, and 1 liter of clean drinking water.

Antibiotics and medicines made to stop diarrhea can help in some cases. Your doctor can decide which treatment is best for you.

How can I prevent it?

Most infections that cause diarrhea are very contagious. The best way to prevent diarrhea is by washing your hands, especially after using the toilet and before touching food.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

American College of Gastroenterology
<http://patients.gi.org/topics/diarrhea-acute-and-chronic/>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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