

Diarrhoea treatment instructions for patients receiving cancer treatment

Diarrhoea in cancer patients is a very common issue and its severity may vary considerably. Diarrhoea is a side effect of certain anticancer treatments and radiation therapy. Mucosal lesions appear as inflammation, ulcers and diarrhoea. Drugs used in cancer treatment affect the absorption of fluids, mucus secretion and bowel movement. The cells in the mucous membranes of the bowel are sensitive to chemotherapy due to their ability to divide rapidly. The worst symptoms usually pass within a couple of days after treatment.

Medical treatment

If the number of bowel movements increases to more than four times a day or if you develop diarrhoea at night, you should start taking loperamide (Imodium[®] or Lopex[®]) as soon as your symptoms appear.

Loperamide is taken as 2 capsules (= 4 mg) immediately, and 2 to 3 hours after the first dose, 1 capsule may be taken after each diarrhoea episode, up to a maximum of 8 capsules per day.

If you are using stool softeners, stop using them.

If you have been prescribed a tablet-based anticancer treatment at home, terminate its use. Contact the unit responsible for your treatment no later than the next working day for further instructions.

Capsule probiotics are not recommended during chemotherapy (risk of blood poisoning), yoghurts containing probiotics, etc. may be consumed.

Rehydration

Abundant hydration is the most important thing in treating diarrhoea. Usually 2-3 litres a day is sufficient. If the case of diarrhoea is severe, plain water is poorly absorbed. If needed, you can use sports drinks or Osmosal[®] or Floridral[®] powders available from pharmacies without a prescription to mix into your water to correct and prevent loss of body water and salt levels as instructed on the package.

Diet

Consuming food does not cause diarrhoea per se, even if the diarrhoea occurs right after eating. Refraining from eating does not cure diarrhoea, and so, despite having diarrhoea, you should eat light, well absorbable food frequently and in small portions.

Recommended foods, low-fibre diet:

- Weak tea, diluted juices, meat and vegetable broth and juice soups.
- Savoury biscuits and salt sticks replace any salts lost
- The so-called BRAT diet, i.e. Banana, Rice, Apple (sauce), Toast.
- Zero- or low-fat meat, fish
- Potatoes, mashed potatoes, cooked vegetables (not cabbage, broccoli)
- Fruits, canned fruits, peeled apple, grated apple

Foods to be avoided:

- Food that contains lactose (milk, ice cream, yoghurts, etc.)
- High-fibre foods (bread, porridge, certain fruits, rhubarb, peas, beans, onion, swede, cabbage, mushrooms and asparagus)
- Foods containing caffeine (coffee, tea, cola drinks) and
- Cold, fizzy and acidic drinks
- Alcohol
- High-fat, baked, fried and spicy foods
- Laxative foods (plums, sugar-free pastilles and confectioneries, foods and drinks containing artificial sweeteners)

Skin care

With diarrhoea, skin damage in the anal area is common. In this case, it is important to keep the skin clean and tidy. Instead of using regular toilet paper, you can spray the area with water or, for example, use non-perfumed wet wipes to wipe the area. If you are not receiving radiation therapy, you can apply basic or protective creams to the area.

If the symptoms are severe or do not stop within two days after starting to take loperamide, contact the unit responsible for your treatment.

Contact the care unit also if

- you develop a fever
- you develop severe abdominal pains
- you cannot drink enough
- you have recently had a course of antibiotics and your stools are green
- you are receiving immunological medication
- your general condition deteriorates.