

# Care Gram

## Diarrhea

### **What Is Diarrhea?**

Stool is mainly made of water. Diarrhea occurs when there is too much water in your stool. As a result, bowel movements may be frequent, watery, soft or semi-formed.

### **What Causes Diarrhea?**

#### Food

Certain foods may cause a person to have diarrhea, sometimes within a short time after eating. For example, many people are not able to digest milk products. Even a small amount can cause diarrhea. Large amounts of fatty foods also can cause this problem.

#### Laxatives

Using laxatives too often or for long periods also can cause diarrhea. Laxatives include:

- Over-the-counter products, such as Milk of Magnesia<sup>®</sup>, Ex-lax<sup>®</sup>, Correctol<sup>®</sup>, Cascara<sup>®</sup>, Epsom salt, Maalox<sup>®</sup> and Mylanta<sup>®</sup>
- Artificial sweeteners such as Sorbitol

#### Prescription Medicine

If a change in bowel habits occurs after taking a new drug, contact your doctor. Some antibiotics are known to cause mild to severe diarrhea. The effects also can be delayed and may take up to a month to begin.

#### Infection

Many types of bacteria live in the bowel, but viruses and other germs can find their way into our bodies. Some of these infect the bowels and cause diarrhea. Most of them are short-lived, but others are very severe. Those affected with the AIDS virus also can be affected several infections.

#### Traveling

The toxic bacteria E. coli occurs in areas or countries with poor water and food supplies. Avoid tap water (especially ice) by drinking bottled water. Do not eat fresh, uncooked produce and fruits that do not have a peel.

#### Diseases

Certain bowel diseases can cause chronic diarrhea. These serious problems require medical treatment. Emotional stress often makes diarrhea worse.



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Many times, the cause is found by avoiding certain medicines. In some cases, a stool test, X-ray or ultrasound are required to locate the cause. A sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy may be necessary to inspect the colon.

### **How Is Diarrhea Treated?**

For persistent diarrhea, treatment will depend on the cause. The following steps may be taken at the onset of diarrhea to help reduce symptoms:

- Avoid solid food and milk products.
- Over-the-counter agents such as Pepto-Bismol<sup>®</sup>, Kaopectate<sup>®</sup> and Immodium<sup>®</sup> may be used.

Other treatments may include:

- Intravenous (IV) fluids
- Changes in your diet
- Change of medications, including over-the-counter medicines such as those listed above.

### **When Should I Contact the Doctor?**

Normally, a change in bowel movements is short-lived. However, it is important to call your doctor when you have:

- Diarrhea that lasts more than two to three weeks
- 6 runny bowel movements within 24 hours
- A fever higher than 101.3 that does not go away within 24 hours
- Severe abdominal pain
- Signs of dehydration
  - Fatigue
  - Increased thirst
  - Dry mouth
  - Muscle cramps
  - Dizziness
  - Confusion

### **How Can I Prevent Diarrhea?**

- Wash your hands regularly
- Stay home from work or school if you feel sick
- Practice food safety