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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Diarrhea in adolescents and adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea describes bowel movements that are runny or watery, and happen 3 or more times in a day. Diarrhea is very common. Most adolescents and adults have diarrhea about 4 times a year. Just about everyone has it at some point.

What causes diarrhea?

Diarrhea can be caused by:

- Viruses
- Bacteria that live in food or water
- Parasites, such as tiny worms that you can catch in some countries
- Side effects from some medicines
- Problems digesting certain types of food
- Diseases that harm the digestive system ([figure 1](#))

Is there anything I can do on my own to get better?

Yes. Here are some things you can try at home:

- Drink a lot of liquids that have water, salt, and sugar. Good choices are water mixed with juice, flavored soda, and soup broth. If you are drinking enough fluids, your urine will be light yellow or almost clear.

- Try to eat a little food. Good choices are potatoes, noodles, rice, oatmeal, crackers, bananas, soup, and boiled vegetables. Salty foods also help.
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Should I see a doctor or nurse?

See your doctor or nurse if:

- You have more than 6 runny bowel movements in 24 hours
 - You have blood in your bowel movements
 - You have a fever higher than 101.3°F (38.5°C) that does not go away after a day
 - You have severe belly pain
 - You are 70 or older
 - Your body has lost too much water. This is called "dehydration." Signs include:
 - Lots of diarrhea that is very watery
 - Feeling very tired
 - Thirst
 - Dry mouth or tongue
 - Muscle cramps
 - Dizziness
 - Confusion
 - Urine that is very yellow, or not needing to urinate for more than 5 hours
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Will I need tests?

Many people do not need to have tests. But it's possible that your doctor will do tests to check if you are dehydrated or to figure out what is causing your diarrhea. Your doctor might do:

- Blood tests
 - Tests on a sample of your bowel movements
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How is diarrhea treated?

That depends on what is causing your diarrhea. You might not need any treatment. If you do, your doctor might recommend:

- Fluids through an "IV" – An IV is a thin tube that goes into your vein. People with a lot of diarrhea might need IV fluids to treat or prevent dehydration.

- Stopping some of your medicines
- Changing the foods you eat
- Antibiotics – These medicines treat bacterial infections. Most people do not need antibiotics, even if they have a bacterial infection. If you are very sick with fever and blood in your bowel movements, your doctor might prescribe antibiotics to help you get better faster.
- Medicines that ease diarrhea – These medicines include [loperamide](#) (brand name: Imodium), [diphenoxylate-atropine](#) (brand name: Lomotil), and [bismuth subsalicylate](#) (brand names: Pepto-Bismol, Kaopectate). You should not take loperamide or diphenoxylate-atropine if you have a fever or blood in your bowel movements. Also, taking too much loperamide has led to serious heart problems in some people. If you have health problems or already take other medicines, talk to your doctor or nurse before trying loperamide. For all of these medicines, it's important to not take more than the label tells you to.

Can diarrhea be prevented?

You can reduce your chances of getting and spreading diarrhea by:

- Washing your hands after changing diapers, cooking, eating, going to the bathroom, taking out the trash, touching animals, and blowing your nose.
- Staying home from work or school until you feel better.
- Paying attention to food safety. Tips include:
 - Not drinking unpasteurized milk or foods made with it
 - Washing fruits and vegetables well before eating them
 - Keeping the refrigerator colder than 40°F and the freezer below 0°F
 - Cooking meat and seafood until well done
 - Cooking eggs until the yolk is firm
 - Washing hands, knives, and cutting boards after they touch raw food

For more tips on food safety, see the table ([table 1](#)).

More on this topic

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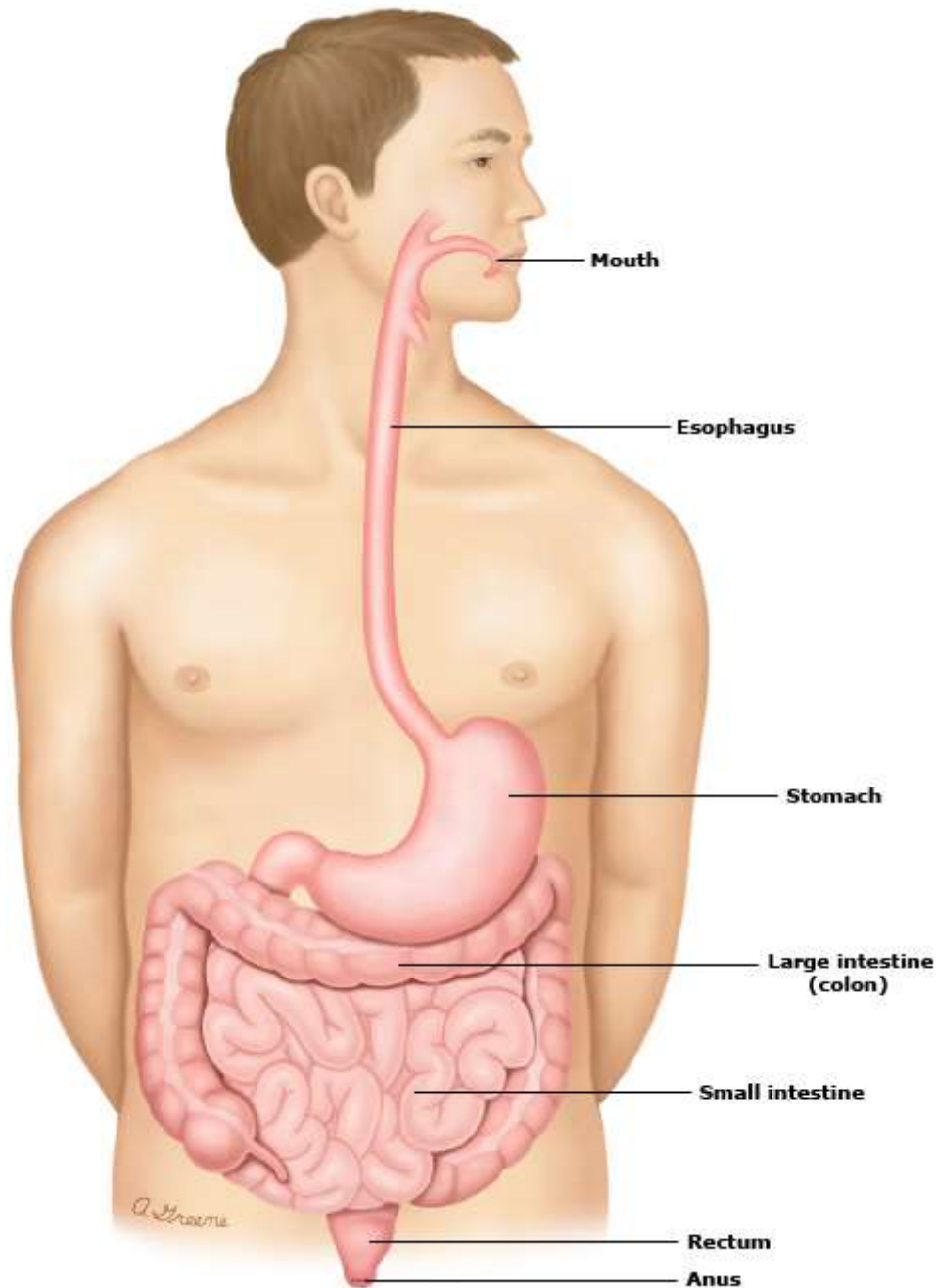
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GRAPHICS

Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together, these organs are called the "digestive system" or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

Graphic 66110 Version 5.0

Tips for safe food handling^[1]

Purchase

Do not buy already-cooked food that is stored next to raw food, even if it is stored on ice.

Do not buy food in cans that are dented, cracked, or have a bulging lid.

Storage

Make sure meat and poultry products are refrigerated when bought.

Use plastic bags to keep juices from meat and fish from touching other foods.

Store perishable items (that can go bad quickly) in the refrigerator within an hour of buying.

Keep refrigerator temperature between 32 and 40°F (0 and 4°C) and freezer temperature at or below 0°F (-18°C).

Freeze meat and poultry that will not be cooked within 48 hours.

Freeze tuna, bluefish, and mahi-mahi that will not be cooked within 24 hours. Other fish can be stored in the refrigerator for 48 hours.

Do not store eggs on the refrigerator door (since that is the warmest part of the refrigerator).

Put leftovers in the refrigerator within 2 hours of cooking them.

Divide leftovers into parts and store in small containers.

Reheat leftovers to 165°F (74°C) before eating.

Preparation

Wash hands with soap and water before cooking and after handling raw meat, poultry, fish, or raw eggs.

Thaw frozen meats and fish in the refrigerator or microwave, not by leaving them out.

Marinate foods in the refrigerator, not at room temperature.

Avoid contact of cooked foods with forks, spoons, knives, plates, or areas that might not be clean.

Wash forks, spoons, knives, plates, and cutting areas with soap and water after they have touched raw meat, poultry, fish, or eggs.

Avoid letting the juices from uncooked meat, poultry, or fish touch cooked foods or foods that will be eaten raw.

Carefully wash all fresh fruits and vegetables.

Avoid recipes that include raw eggs.

Cooking

Use a meat thermometer.

- Cook beef, veal, and lamb (steaks, roasts, chops) to 145°F (63°C) and rest for 3 minutes.

- Cook ground beef, pork, veal, and lamb to 160°F (71°C).
- Cook poultry (chicken, turkey) to 165°F (74°C).
- Cook fresh pork (roasts, chops, ham that is not precooked) to 145°F (63°C) and rest for 3 minutes.
- Cook precooked ham to 140°F (60°C).
- Cook fish until the flesh is firm and separates easily with a fork.
- Cook shellfish until the flesh is firm.

Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm.

Boil juices from raw meat or fish before using on cooked food.

Serving

Serve cooked foods on clean plates with clean forks, spoons, and knives.

Keep hot foods at 140°F (60°C) and cold foods below 40°F (4°C).

Never leave foods at room temperature longer than 2 hours, or 1 hour if the room is hotter than 90°F (32°C).

Use coolers and ice packs to take perishable foods (that might go bad) away from home.

Reference:

1. United States Department of Agriculture. Food Safety. Available at <http://www.foodsafety.gov> (Accessed on January 19, 2016).

Graphic 60529 Version 7.0

