

AHRQ Safety Program for Telemedicine: Improving Antibiotic Use

Acute Diarrhea – Patient Guide

What is diarrhea?

- Diarrhea is when stools are loose or watery, often occurring more frequently than usual.
- Most infectious cases are caused by viruses, and less commonly by bacteria or parasites.
- Some cases are due to medications (such as antibiotics), certain foods, or chronic digestive conditions.



What should I do to feel better?

- Stay hydrated: Drink plenty of fluids such as water, oral rehydration solutions (e.g., Pedialyte®), diluted juice, or broth.
- Eat bland foods: Try bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast (“BRAT” diet) and slowly return to your regular diet as you feel better.
- Rest and avoid strenuous activity until you recover.
- Over-the-counter options: Loperamide (Imodium®) can help reduce stool frequency in adults who do not have a fever or bloody stools. Bismuth salicylate (Pepto-Bismol®) can also be considered for adults with diarrhea. Both loperamide and bismuth salicylate can be dangerous for children.
- Some people take probiotics, although we don't know yet how well these work.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, very greasy, or high-sugar foods until symptoms resolve.

Why are antibiotics rarely needed for diarrhea?

- Most infectious diarrhea is caused by viruses, which do not respond to antibiotics.
- Unnecessary antibiotics can prolong symptoms, cause side effects, and increase your risk of *C. difficile* infection.
- Antibiotics are used only for certain confirmed bacterial infections.

When should I contact my healthcare provider?

You will usually start to feel better within 3 days. Contact your healthcare provider if you have:

- Fever higher than 101.3° Fahrenheit (38.5° Celsius)
- Bloody or black/tarry stools
- Severe abdominal pain or swelling
- Signs of dehydration (dry mouth, dizziness, little or no urination)
- Diarrhea lasting more than 7 days
- Recent antibiotic use and new diarrhea
- A weakened immune system, are pregnant, or are very young/elderly

This document is intended to provide health-related information so that you may be better informed. It is not a substitute for your healthcare provider's medical advice and should not be relied upon for treatment for specific medical conditions.



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