

# Help with eating if you have... diarrhoea

**This leaflet gives advice on preventing and controlling diarrhoea.**

## Introduction

Cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy, can affect the healthy cells that line the digestive tract. This can result in diarrhoea. Other causes of diarrhoea include surgery, certain medications and infections. For many people diarrhoea is a mild, temporary side effect but for others it can be severe. Changing your diet may help to control your symptoms. However, if this does not provide adequate control, you may find anti-diarrhoea medicines helpful. Please discuss this with your doctor.

## Dietary changes that may help control your diarrhoea:

### Fluids

- Sip fluids slowly but consistently throughout the day.
- Aim for 10 cups (2 litres or 4 pints) of fluid per day, such as water, herbal teas or squash. You may need to limit or avoid sugar free drinks made with artificial sweeteners mannitol, sorbitol and xylitol as these have a laxative effect.
- Drinks such as tea, coffee, or other caffeinated drinks (such as Cola or energy drinks) may worsen diarrhoea therefore limit these to a maximum of 3 cups per day.
- Alcohol can also make diarrhoea worse, so it is best to avoid it.
- If you are suffering from severe diarrhoea then oral rehydration solutions such as Diarolyte can help prevent dehydration as they replace both the loss of fluids and salts.

### General advice

- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Eat your meals slowly.

### Eat less insoluble fibre

Insoluble fibre is the rough, stringy part of plant foods, which cannot be digested. It helps speed up the movement of food through your gut transit, which can make diarrhoea worse.

The following table is a useful guide to help you reduce your fibre intake:

Choose low fibre	Avoid high fibre
White bread, pasta, noodles and rice.	Brown, wholemeal, granary or seeded bread. Wholewheat or brown pasta, noodles and rice.
Vegetables: cooked and with any skins removed.	Raw vegetable: All skins, seeds, stalks and peel. Salad, beans, peas, pulses and lentils.
Fruit: Skins removed and cooked / tinned fruit. Fruit juice.	Raw fruit: All fruit – skin, pith and seeds. Smoothies.

## Reduce fatty foods

You may find that too much fat aggravates diarrhoea. You could reduce your fat intake by:

- Avoiding fried foods.
- Using low fat milk, cheese and yoghurt.
- Using lean meat and cooking without adding fat.
- Removing the skin from chicken.
- Using less butter, margarine, oil and cream.

If you have experienced significant weight loss or are struggling to eat regularly, a health care professional may have advised you to include high fat foods in your diet by. If this is the case, ask to speak to a dietitian who can advise you of other high calorie alternatives.

## Lactose

Due to the treatment of certain cancers or because of prolonged diarrhoea, some people find they become intolerant to lactose. Lactose is the sugar found in milk and milk products. For most people, simply switching to a lactose free milk is enough to control these symptoms (yoghurt and hard cheeses are naturally low in lactose).

## Probiotics

Probiotics are good bacteria found in certain food products and are available as supplements. They can help improve the balance of bacteria in the gut. There is emerging evidence that probiotics can improve symptoms of diarrhoea, although this will depend on the cause of your diarrhoea. **Please note** – taking probiotics is not recommended in some cancers, so if you are considering using them, please speak to your doctor or dietitian beforehand.

## Stress or anxiety

You may find it helpful to seek support if your mental or emotional health contributes to diarrhoea symptoms. The following may be useful:

- Talking Health – Berkshire Healthcare, Tel: 0300 365 2000 Email: [talkingtherapies@berkshire.nhs.uk](mailto:talkingtherapies@berkshire.nhs.uk) Website: [www.talkinghealth.berkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.talkinghealth.berkshire.nhs.uk)
- Headspace or Calm – guided meditation and mindfulness [www.headspace.com/](http://www.headspace.com/) or [www.calm.com/](http://www.calm.com/)

**If you continue to have diarrhoea, ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to a dietitian.**

## Useful Contacts

Macmillan Cancer Support [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

World Cancer Research Fund [www.wcrf-uk.org](http://www.wcrf-uk.org)

Cancer Research UK [www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

Produced by Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust Dietitians

Reviewed: November 2023. Next review due: November 2025

Compassionate

Aspirational

Resourceful

Excellent