

Diarrhoea

This information is about diarrhoea. [Diarrhoea](#) means passing more stools (poo) than you normally do. Or having watery or loose stools. Some cancers can prevent food from being absorbed properly in the bowel, causing diarrhoea. Cancer drug treatments can cause diarrhoea. This includes some chemotherapy drugs and targeted therapies. Immunotherapy can cause the immune system to become too active and this can also cause bowel problems. Radiotherapy to the pelvic area can cause diarrhoea, usually during treatment but it can happen months or years later (late effects). We have more information about the [bowel problems after pelvic radiotherapy](#) and the [late effects](#).

If your diarrhoea is caused by radiotherapy, chemotherapy or targeted therapy, it is important to take the anti-diarrhoea medicines prescribed by your cancer team. If you have diarrhoea after surgery for bowel cancer, talk to your doctor or specialist nurse before changing your diet. Other medications can also cause diarrhoea. Or it can be caused by an infection. Antibiotics can kill off the healthy bacteria normally found in the bowel. This can cause diarrhoea.

Diarrhoea may be a temporary, mild problem. But, for some people it can be severe and cause dehydration. They can become very unwell and will need to see a doctor or go to the hospital for treatment. It is important to tell your cancer team, or contact the hospital on the telephone number you have been given, if you have diarrhoea, if it is getting worse, or if anti-diarrhoea treatment is not helping. It is very important to follow any advice you have been given by your cancer team.

Sometimes severe [constipation](#) can be mistaken for diarrhoea. If hard stools block the bowel, liquid sometimes passes around it. This is called overflow and can look like diarrhoea.

Tips for managing diarrhoea

- Cut down on fibre from cereals, fruit and vegetables.
- Avoid most milk and dairy products.
- Drink plenty of fluids, but avoid alcohol and coffee. Also avoid fizzy drinks, which can cause wind and stomach cramps.
- Eat small, frequent meals of light foods – such as white fish, chicken, eggs, white bread, pasta and rice. Avoid spicy or high-fat foods. Eat your meals slowly.
- The bacteria found in live yoghurt or yoghurt drinks may replace the healthy bacteria so may help ease diarrhoea caused by antibiotics. But you should avoid live yoghurt while you are having chemotherapy or if your immunity is low.

It is always best to check advice with your healthcare team as sometimes advice can vary. Your healthcare team can give you advice that is suitable for you. You may have different needs relating to your cancer type, or from effects of cancer treatments.

Access to toilets

If you have problems with bowel control, you may feel worried about going out. It may help to find out where the toilets are before you go. The [Great British Toilet map](#) can help you to find public toilets by postcode or through the location on your mobile phone. There are also toilet apps for mobile phones. Macmillan [has a free toilet card](#) you can use. The card says you have a medical condition that means you need urgent access to a toilet. The National Key Scheme for Toilets offers access to about 9,000 locked public toilets across the UK. You can buy a key online from places such as [Disability Rights UK](#). They also have a guide that explains where the toilets are.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including [audiobooks](#). Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on orders.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- MAC11671 [Managing the symptoms of cancer](#)
- MAC12921 [Side effects of cancer treatment](#)
- MAC13613 [Eating problems and cancer](#)
- MAC18911 [Managing the bowel late effects of pelvic radiotherapy](#)
- MAC15193 [Macmillan toilet card and leaflet](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line on **0808 808 00 00**.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk to [chat online](#) to one of our team.

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the [Relay UK app](#). Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

If you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#). Our free [Macmillan Buddy service](#) can arrange weekly calls with a friendly volunteer who understands what you're going through.

Other useful contact details

- Bladder & Bowel Community – visit www.bladderandbowel.org
- Bladder and Bowel UK – visit www.bbuk.org.uk

Notes and questions
