

Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea means that you need to empty your bowels (poo) more often than you usually do. It also means your stools are looser than usual.

Some cancer treatments can cause diarrhoea. Sometimes an infection or other medications, such as antibiotics, can also cause diarrhoea.

Diarrhoea can be a temporary, mild side effect. But for some people, it can be severe, and they need to see a doctor to help manage it. Tell your doctor if you have diarrhoea. They can find out the cause and may prescribe anti-diarrhoea medicines.

If your diarrhoea is caused by radiotherapy, chemotherapy, targeted therapy or immunotherapy, you must take the anti-diarrhoea medicines prescribed by your doctor. It is not enough to change your diet. If you have diarrhoea after [surgery for bowel cancer](#), talk to your doctor or specialist nurse before changing your diet.

Sometimes diarrhoea can be severe. Contact the hospital straight away if:

- you have diarrhoea at night
- you have diarrhoea more than 4 times in a day
- you have a moderate or severe increase in [stoma](#) activity
- the anti-diarrhoea drugs do not work within 24 hours.

Severe constipation can sometimes be mistaken for diarrhoea. If hard stools block the bowel, liquid stool sometimes passes around it. This is called overflow and can look like diarrhoea.

Tips for managing diarrhoea

- Drink at least 2 litres (3½ pints) of fluids each day. This will replace the fluids lost from diarrhoea.
- Avoid drinking alcohol and coffee.
- Eat small, frequent meals made from light foods. This could be white fish, poultry, well-cooked eggs, white bread, pasta or rice.
- Eat your meals slowly.
- Eat less fibre, such as cereals, raw fruits and vegetables, until the diarrhoea improves.
- Avoid greasy, fatty foods such as chips and beef burgers, and spicy foods like chilli peppers.

Antibiotics can kill the healthy bacteria normally found in the bowel. But the bacteria found in live yoghurt or yoghurt drinks may replace them. This may help ease diarrhoea caused by antibiotics. You should avoid live yoghurt while you are having chemotherapy or if your immunity is low.

Access to public toilets

If you have bowel problems, knowing you may need to get to a toilet quickly can make going out a worry.

We can send you a [Macmillan Toilet Card](#), which you can show to people if you need to use a toilet urgently while you are out.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

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

- [Managing the symptoms of cancer](#)
- [Eating problems and cancer](#)
- [Macmillan toilet card](#)

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

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 where you can [chat to us online](#).

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

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#).

Other useful contact details

- Bladder & bowel community – visit www.bladderandbowel.org

Notes and questions
