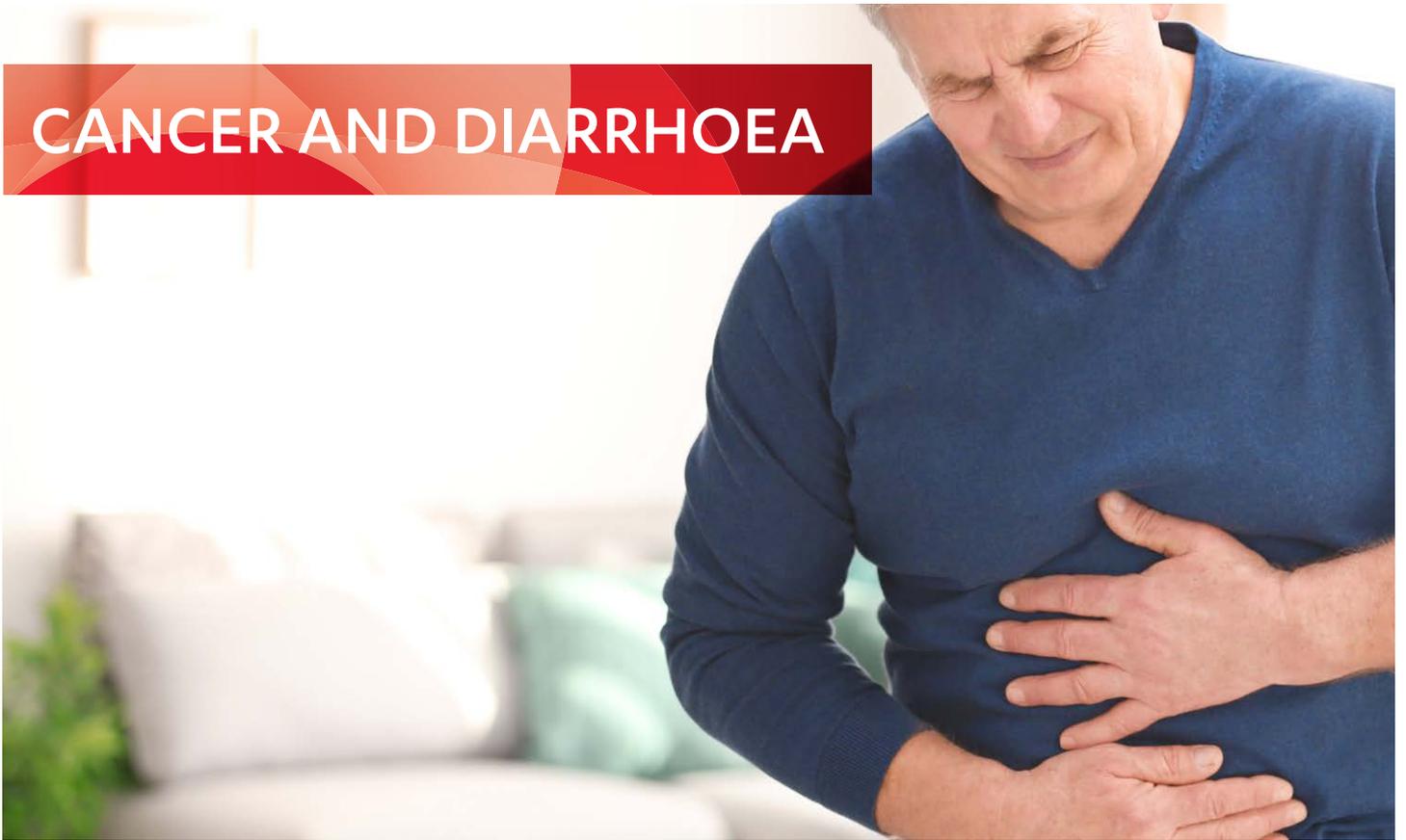


CANCER AND DIARRHOEA



Diarrhoea is the frequent passing of loose and watery bowel movements and is an unpleasant but common side-effect of cancer or its treatment.

Diarrhoea can be an inconvenience for people with cancer – but it can also sometimes be a sign of something more serious. **Chemotherapy** can cause diarrhoea and so can **radiation therapy** to the bowel or pelvic area. Cancer treatment can make you more susceptible to various infections, which can cause diarrhoea. The signs and symptoms of diarrhoea may include:

- Bloating in your belly
- Cramps
- Thin, loose or watery stools
- An urgent feeling that you need to have a bowel movement
- Nausea and vomiting

Other, more serious side-effects of diarrhoea include:

- Increased risk of dehydration and weight loss
- A loss of appetite
- Fever

WHAT CAUSES DIARRHOEA?

As well as chemotherapy and radiation therapy, diarrhoea can be caused by antibiotics, other medications, stress or anxiety, viruses, bacterial infection, food poisoning or food intolerance.

‘Overflow’ diarrhoea is diarrhoea resulting from chronic constipation. When the bowel is blocked by hard impacted faeces, some liquid may seep past and appear like diarrhoea.

Some diarrhoea may be unpreventable during cancer treatment. Your health care team will provide advice to manage and prevent any problems. It is always important to identify and treat the underlying cause of your diarrhoea.

Talk to your doctor about what you can expect and how long your diarrhoea may last.

CABRINI CANCER EXERCISE AND WELLNESS CENTRE

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 **Cabrini**
CANCER
INSTITUTE

MANAGING DIARRHOEA AND YOUR HEALTH

Nutrition is very important during cancer treatment. You need to stay well hydrated, eat well and maintain your weight. Some suggestions to help manage your diarrhoea include:

Medications

Take anti-diarrhoeal medication as prescribed by your doctor. Make sure that none of your other medications will make your diarrhoea worse (check this with your doctor).

Adequate hydration

Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Aim for at least two litres (six to eight glasses) of fluid per day.

- Hydrating fluids include diluted juice, weak cordial, soup or broth, herbal teas, milk drinks and nutritional supplements e.g. Sustagen® or Ensure®.
- You may need oral rehydration drinks to replace lost electrolytes. Your pharmacist/nurse can give you more information on these products e.g. Hydralyte® or Gastrolyte®.

Signs of dehydration can include dark urine, less frequent/smaller amounts of urine, headaches, dry skin, rapid heart rate or confusion.

Eat small frequent meals

It is important to continue eating to avoid weight loss.

- Eat small frequent meals – try to eat something every two to three hours
- Choose foods that are high in energy and protein, e.g. cheese and crackers, yoghurt

If losing weight unintentionally, have nourishing fluids, such as milk drinks and nutritional supplements, instead of water or other clear fluids which provide little nutrition.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE EATING ENOUGH?

Monitor your weight once a week. Losing weight could mean that you are not getting enough nourishment from food. Speak to your dietitian if you are losing weight or if you are having trouble eating enough.

OTHER DIETARY SUGGESTIONS

A few short-term diet changes may be helpful to prevent your diarrhoea from becoming worse. It is best to talk to your **dietitian** about modifications to your diet that may assist you. Your dietitian can advise on appropriate food choices to suit your needs.

Avoid large amounts of:

- Juice, soft drink and cordial
- Coffee, tea and alcohol
- Fatty, sweet or spicy foods
- Insoluble fibre e.g. wheat bran, rice bran, the skins of fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, dried beans and wholegrain foods
- Artificial sweeteners in sugar-free products such as gum and lollies

There is no evidence to support the avoidance of dairy products. In severe cases of diarrhoea, low lactose products may be better tolerated e.g. Zymil®, Liddells® or soy milk. Foods that are high in soluble fibre such as oats, white bread, white rice, pasta, and bananas may be beneficial.

WHEN TO SEEK ADVICE

You should seek advice if you experience:

- Six or more loose bowel movements a day, for more than two days
- Blood in your stool or rectal area
- Nausea or vomiting that prevents you from drinking liquids to replace lost fluids
- A fever that is high (above 38°C)
- Severe pain in your belly or rear end
- Weight loss

WHO TO CONTACT FOR ADVICE

- **Symptom and Urgent Review Clinic (SURC):**
Monday to Friday 8.30am – 4pm.
Please call the clinic on (03) 9508 1944 for advice.
- To make an appointment to see a **dietitian**, contact Cabrini Access on (03) 9508 1700 or email: access@cabrini.com.au
- Alternatively contact your GP or treating specialist
- For urgent assistance, go to your closest emergency department

Disclaimer: This information sheet is provided for general information purposes only. This information sheet does not provide you with specific personal, professional or medical advice. It is not intended to be a substitute for professional or medical advice and should not be relied upon as such. You should obtain advice from your treating doctor or healthcare professional about your individual circumstances.
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