

Diarrhea

Diarrhea is when you have loose, watery stools more than three times a day. This can be a real problem for those with HIV. It makes the body weak, raises the risk of infection and can make your muscles waste away. Some people stop their HIV treatment in the hope that it will stop the problem.

Signs

You may have gas, feel sick to your stomach or a need to use the bathroom right away and often. You may have a fever or bloody stools.

Fluid and minerals are lost when you have loose stool. The signs include:

- Dark urine
- Dry skin
- Feel very tired
- Light-headed
- Thirst
- Need to pee less often

Causes

Many things can cause loose stool:

- Antibiotics
- Anti-HIV meds
- Infections by bacteria, parasites or viruses
- Disease in the bowels, stomach or pancreas
- Stomach or gallbladder surgery
- Food that is hard to digest. Things like dairy products, fatty foods, beans, or cabbage
- Meds to treat blood pressure or gas
- Stress

How to Know You Have Diarrhea

Loose stool is not pleasant, but it is not always harmful. See a doctor right away if you have:

- A fever of 102° F or higher
- Bad pain in the belly or rectum
- Bloody or black, tarry stools
- Loose stool for more than three days

A doctor will ask about your recent meals and snacks. Be sure to tell the doctor what meds or herbs you take.

The doctor may do tests such as:

- A stool culture. This is done to check for bacteria, parasites, infection or signs that the body does not use fat well.
- Blood tests to rule out a disease
- Food allergy tests
- Tests to see inside the rectum or colon.
- A CD4 cell count. When the CD4 cell count falls below 200, the risk of infection goes up.

Treatment

If a cause is found, it should be treated.

If a cause cannot be found, treatment tries to stop the problem and prevent fluid loss.

A person with loose stool can lose up to a gallon of water a day. Key reserves are lost with the waste. The main ones are sodium and potassium. If you do not stop the fluid loss, your body may go into shock. You could die.

Drink plenty of clear liquids. Teas without caffeine, broth, ginger ale, or sports drinks are all helpful. Plain water replaces fluids. It does not replace minerals.

It may also help to:

- Take calcium carbonate or citrate. A doctor does not need to prescribe calcium.

- Take over-the-counter treatments. Do not do this if the problem is due to bacteria or parasites. These products may make the problem last longer.
- Take antibiotics to fight bacteria or parasites.
- Use added fiber and products with psyllium or oat bran.
- Avoid dairy, fatty or spicy foods.
- Cut back on raw fruits and vegetables, grains and seeds.
- Foods you should eat include: bananas, plain white rice, applesauce, plain noodles, boiled eggs, mashed potatoes or oatmeal.

Prevention

You can take these steps to avoid loose stool:

- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water. Always wash before you eat or handle food.
- Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.
- Avoid foods that you do not digest well. Milk, drinks with caffeine, fatty or fried foods, alcohol and high levels of vitamin C can all lead to loose stool.
- Be careful about what you eat and drink when you travel

For more information

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare's Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

