



Acute Diarrhoea

Most healthy people open their bowels between three times a day and three times a week. Normal stools are usually solid. The term diarrhoea is used when stools are passed more than three times a day and/or when the stools become loose or watery. In acute diarrhoea, symptoms come on suddenly but usually clear up within 5-10 days.

Causes of acute diarrhoea?

The most common cause of an attack of acute diarrhoea is an intestinal infection ('gastroenteritis'). Infants and young children are particularly susceptible to intestinal infections, which are most commonly caused by a rotavirus.

Food poisoning is another common form of acute diarrhoea, most commonly caused by the bacteria *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. These infections are passed on through contaminated food, such as poultry and eggs, or water; and sometimes by a person such as food handler who has the infection, but has no symptoms of that infection (a carrier).

People who travel a lot are also susceptible to intestinal infection, the most common cause being the bacterium, *Escherichia coli*.

Acute diarrhoea can sometimes occur during or after a course of antibiotics, as a result of a variety of drugs and alcohol, and is associated with attacks of acute anxiety

Symptoms of acute diarrhoea

Acute infectious gastroenteritis is commonly associated with cramping abdominal pain and diarrhoea. More recently Norovirus has caused a seasonal short vomiting and diarrhoea type illness. *Shigella* and *Campylobacter* can cause fevers. When there is direct damage to the bowel blood may be associated with the diarrhoea (dysentery).

When should I consult my doctor?

After a few days if acute diarrhoea does not settle you should see your doctor. An earlier medical review would be necessary if there was severe diarrhoea with dehydration or in the elderly and the very young.

You should ask for an early appointment with the doctor if liquid stools contain blood and/or if you are losing weight.

What will the doctor do?

After taking important details from you and doing a general examination, the doctor will usually examine the rectum (back passage) with a finger. The doctor may: Pass an instrument through the back passage to examine the lining of the bowel. Arrange laboratory examination of stool samples to see if there is infection.

Arrange blood tests. Arrange a flexible sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy

(inserting a flexible telescope into the back passage so the doctor can see the whole or part of the colon).





Treatments

Acute Diarrhoea:

Ask yourself whether this is maybe in part related to anxiety, diet, medicines or alcohol. Keep up a good fluid intake, using re-hydration solutions (Diarolyte) when much liquid is passed to replace lost fluid and salt.

Observe good hand hygiene, in case the diarrhoea is infectious.

Wash your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet.

Don't prepare food for other people, especially babies and old people.

Consider taking an anti-diarrhoeal drug such as loperamide, which can be obtained for adults without a prescription if the symptoms are severe. Always read the label and ask your pharmacist for advice if unsure.

IT IS DANGEROUS TO GIVE THESE TO BABIES AND CHILDREN WITHOUT MEDICAL ADVICE.

The doctor may prescribe an antibiotic if a severe infection is diagnosed or suspected.

Avoiding acute diarrhoea

Because most acute diarrhoea is related to intestinal infection that is usually transmitted by contaminated food or water, then it is possible to avoid an illness by being scrupulously careful about food and fluid intake.

Only drink boiled or bottled water and avoid ice cubes when the origin of the water is uncertain. Avoid raw, unpeeled fruit and salads, shellfish, milk and all foods that might contain raw egg. The safest food is that, which is hot and well cooked.

Travel and acute diarrhoea

For those travelling to high-risk areas (such as the Indian sub-continent, South-East Asia, Africa, Latin America), it is possible to avoid an illness by being scrupulously careful about food and fluid intake. Most acute diarrhoea is related to intestinal infection that is usually transmitted by contaminated food or water. Only drink boiled or bottled water and avoid ice cubes when the origin of the water is uncertain. Avoid raw, unpeeled fruit and salads, shellfish and all foods that might contain raw egg. The safest food is that which is hot and well cooked.

An oral vaccine is available to provide protection against cholera for travellers visiting an endemic area.

