

Diarrhea

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is defined as watery or un-formed (loose) stools, which occur more frequently than normal. Diarrhea can be caused by new, unusual, or spicy foods; certain medications; and viruses, bacteria, and other parasites.

What are the symptoms of diarrhea?

The primary symptom of diarrhea is frequent loose or watery stools, but other symptoms can occur, including stomach cramps or tenderness and fever.

How serious is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is not usually serious; most people will feel well within one to two days and have no long-term health effects related to the illness. A healthcare provider should be seen if diarrhea is bloody.

Sometimes people with diarrhea due to a viral or bacterial infection are unable to drink enough liquids to replace what is lost. These people can become dehydrated and may need medical attention. Dehydration is more commonly seen among the very young, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems.

How do people become ill with diarrhea?

People can become infected with bacteria/viruses in several ways, including:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with bacteria/viruses;
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with bacteria/viruses and placing their hands in their mouth; or
- Having direct contact with a person who is ill with diarrhea or contact with their stool, because bacteria and viruses are found in the stool of infected people. Some bacteria/viruses are very contagious and can spread easily from person to person.

What treatment is available for people with diarrhea?

Anti-diarrheal agents are available over the counter. These medications slow down diarrhea. However, they are not recommended when diarrhea is caused by a viral or bacterial infection.

If a bacterial infection is diagnosed as the cause of diarrhea, the healthcare provider may recommend an antibiotic. Plenty of liquids should be given to keep the ill person hydrated and lots of rest is recommended.

Can diarrhea be prevented?

Yes. Prevention includes:

- Frequently washing hands, especially after using the toilet and changing diapers and before eating or preparing foods.
- Persons who are ill with diarrhea should not prepare food while they have symptoms and for at least a few days after they recover. Food that may have been contaminated by an ill person should be disposed of promptly. It is particularly important for ill people to practice good hand washing.
- Childcare center managers should pay special attention to clients and staff who have gastrointestinal symptoms. Children in diapers should be excluded from childcare settings until they no longer have diarrhea. Staff members with diarrhea should be excluded from food preparation and service as well as diapering/toileting duty until 24 hours after their diarrhea has ended, or, in the case of some illnesses, until the Health District has released them to return to work.

For more information:

Spokane Regional Health District
Disease Prevention and Response
(509) 324.1442 | TDD (509) 324.1464
SRHD.org