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Patient information: Diarrhea in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is diarrhea? — Diarrhea describes bowel movements that are runny or watery, and happen 3 or more times in a day. Diarrhea is very common. Most adults have diarrhea about 4 times a year. Just about everyone has it at some point.

What causes diarrhea? — Diarrhea can be caused by:

- Viruses
- Bacteria that live in food or water
- Parasites, such as tiny worms that you can catch in some countries
- Side effects from some medicines
- Problems digesting certain types of food
- Diseases that harm the digestive system ([figure 1](#))

Is there anything I can do on my own to get better? — Yes. Here are some things you can try at home:

- Drink a lot of liquids that have water, salt, and sugar. Good choices are water mixed with juice, flavored soda, and soup broth. If you are drinking enough fluids, your urine will be light yellow or almost clear.
- Try to eat a little food. Good choices are potatoes, noodles, rice, oatmeal, crackers, bananas, soup, and boiled vegetables. Salty foods help the most.
- Take a medicine called [loperamide](#) (brand name: Imodium). It is safe if you do not have a fever or bloody bowel movements.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — See your doctor or nurse if:

- Your symptoms still aren't better after 48 hours
- You have had more than 6 runny bowel movements in 24 hours
- You have lots of small bowel movements with blood or mucus
- Your diarrhea is black or bloody
- You have a fever higher than 100.4°F (38°C)
- You have severe belly pain
- You are 70 or older
- You have diarrhea after finishing antibiotics
- Your body has lost too much water. This is called dehydration. Signs include:
 - Lots of diarrhea that is very watery

- Feeling very tired
- Thirst
- Dry mouth or tongue
- Muscle cramps
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Urine that is very yellow, or not needing to urinate for more than 5 hours

Will I need tests? — Many people don't need any tests at all. But it's possible your doctor will want to do:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Tests on a sample of your bowel movements

These tests can show whether you have an infection, and if so, what kind. They can also show if you are dehydrated.

How is diarrhea treated? — That depends on what is causing your diarrhea. You might not need any treatment. If you do, your doctor might recommend:

- Antibiotics – These medicines fight infections.
- Medicines that ease diarrhea, such as [loperamide](#) (brand name: Imodium), diphenoxylate (brand name: Lomotil), or bismuth subsalicylate (brand names: Pepto-Bismol, Kaopectate)
- Fluids through an IV. This is a thin tube that goes into your vein. An IV can help if you have severe dehydration.
- Stopping some of your medicines
- Changing the foods you eat

Can diarrhea be prevented? — You can reduce your chances of getting and spreading diarrhea by:

- Washing your hands after changing diapers, cooking, eating, going to the bathroom, taking out the trash, touching animals, and blowing your nose.
- Staying home from work or school until you feel better.
- Paying attention to food safety. Tips include:
 - Not drinking unpasteurized milk or foods made with it
 - Washing fruits and vegetables well before eating them
 - Keeping the refrigerator colder than at 40°F and the freezer below 0°F
 - Cooking meat and seafood until well done
 - Cooking eggs until the yolk is firm
 - Washing hands, knives, and cutting boards after they touch raw food

For more tips on food safety, see the table ([table 1](#)).

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[Patient information: Acute diarrhea in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Food poisoning \(food-borne illness\) \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Acute diarrhea in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Chronic diarrhea in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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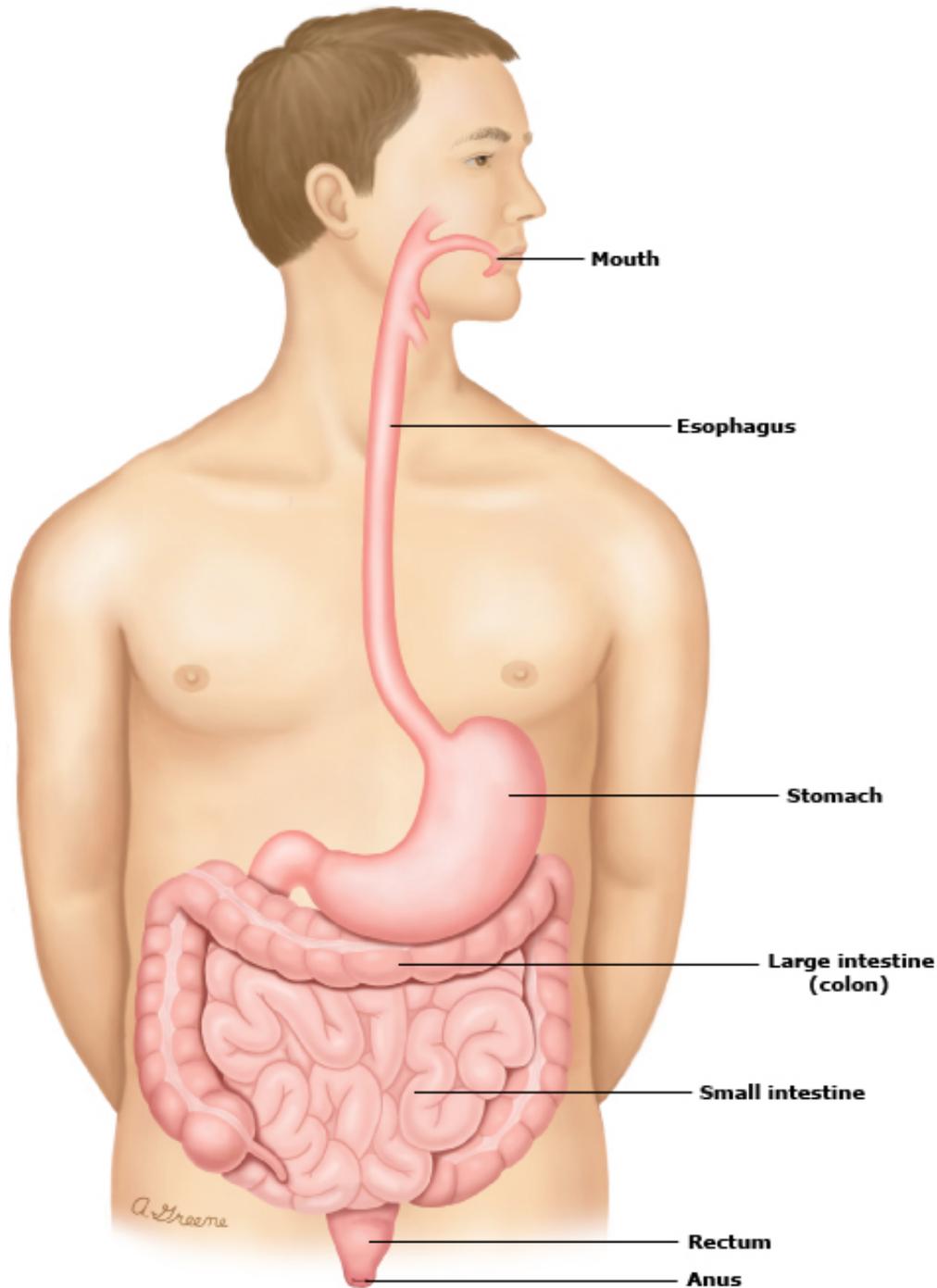
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GRAPHICS

Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

Graphic 66110 Version 4.0

Tips for safe food handling

Purchase

Do not buy already-cooked food that is stored next to raw food, even if it is stored on ice.

Do not buy food in cans that are dented, cracked, or have a bulging lid.

Storage

Make sure meat and poultry products are refrigerated when bought.

Use plastic bags to keep juices from meat and fish from touching other foods.

Store perishable items (that can go bad quickly) in the refrigerator within an hour of buying.

Keep refrigerator temperature between 32 and 40°F (0 and 4°C) and freezer temperature at or below 0°F (-18°C).

Freeze meat and poultry that will not be cooked within 48 hours.

Freeze tuna, bluefish and mahi-mahi that will not be cooked within 24 hours; other fish can be stored in the refrigerator for 48 hours.

Do not store eggs on the refrigerator door (since that is the warmest part of the refrigerator).

Put leftovers in the refrigerator within 2 hours of cooking them.

Divide leftovers into parts and store in small containers.

Reheat leftovers to 165°F (74°C) before eating.

Preparation

Wash hands with soap and water before cooking and after handling raw meat, poultry, fish, or raw eggs.

Thaw frozen meats and fish in the refrigerator or microwave, not by leaving them out.

Marinate foods in the refrigerator, not at room temperature.

Avoid contact of cooked foods with forks, spoons, knives, plates, or areas that may not be clean.

Wash forks, spoons, knives, plates, and cutting areas with soap and water after they have touched raw meat, poultry, fish or eggs.

Avoid letting the juices from uncooked meat, poultry or fish touch cooked foods or foods that will be eaten raw.

Carefully wash all fresh fruits and vegetables.

Avoid recipes that include raw eggs.

Cooking

Use a meat thermometer; cook beef and lamb to an internal temperature of 145°F (63°C), pork and ground beef to 160°F (71°C), and poultry to 170 to 180°F (77 to 82°C).

Cook eggs until the yolk begins to harden.

Boil juices from raw meat or fish before using on cooked food.

Serving

Serve cooked foods on clean plates with clean forks, spoons, and knives.

Keep hot foods at 140°F (60°C) and cold foods below 40°F (4°C).

Never leave foods at room temperature longer than 2 hours, or 1 hour if the room is hotter than 90°F (32°C).

Use coolers and ice packs to take perishable foods (that may go bad) away from home.

Graphic 60529 Version 3.0