

Diarrhea

Diarrhea means having bowel movements that are soft, loose, or watery more often than normal. If diarrhea is severe or lasts a long time, the body does not absorb enough water and nutrients. This can cause you to become dehydrated or malnourished. Cancer treatments, or the cancer itself, may cause diarrhea or make it worse. Tell your healthcare team if you have diarrhea.

When to call your doctor:

Diarrhea that leads to dehydration (the loss of too much fluid from the body) and low levels of salt and potassium (important minerals needed by the body) can be life threatening. Call your health care team if you feel dizzy or lightheaded, have dark yellow urine or are not urinating, or have a fever of 100.5° F (38°C) or higher.

Ways to Manage Diarrhea:

You may be advised to take steps to prevent complications from diarrhea:

- **Drink plenty of fluid each day.** Most people need to drink 8 to 12 cups of fluid each day. Ask your doctor how much fluid you should drink each day. For severe diarrhea, only clear liquids or IV (intravenous) fluids may be advised for a short period.
- **Eat small meals that are easy on your stomach.** Eat six to eight small meals throughout the day, instead of three large meals. Foods high in potassium and sodium (minerals you lose when you have diarrhea) are good food choices, for most people. Limit or avoid foods and drinks that could make your diarrhea worse. Some examples of foods and drinks that could worsen diarrhea include: alcohol, milk, dairy products, caffeine-containing products (coffee, tea, chocolate), high fiber foods (raw fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grain products), and high fat foods (deep-fried food).
- **Check before taking medicine.** Check with your doctor before taking medicine for diarrhea. Your doctor will prescribe the correct medicine for you.
- **Keep your anal area clean and dry.** Try using warm water and wipes to stay clean. It may help to take warm, shallow baths. These are called sitz baths.

**The above material was adapted from "Side Effects of Cancer Treatment" and was originally published by the National Cancer Institute.*

New Onset Headache/Neurological Symptoms

If you are experiencing a sudden, severe headache or any new onset neurological symptoms please contact your doctor *immediately* for an evaluation to rule out the possibility of an intracranial bleed (a bleed in the brain).

New onset neurological symptoms include symptoms such as: weakness in an arm or leg, decreased alertness, changes in vision, tingling or numbness, difficulty speaking or understanding speech, loss of fine motor skills (such as hand tremors), and loss of balance.



GIST Treatment Symptom Management Toolkit

Nausea and Vomiting

Nausea is when you feel sick to your stomach, as if you are going to throw up. Vomiting is when you throw up. There are different types of nausea and vomiting caused by cancer treatment. Controlling nausea and vomiting will help you to feel better and prevent more serious problems such as malnutrition and dehydration.

Your doctor will determine what is causing your symptoms and advise you on ways to prevent them. Medicines called anti-nausea drugs or antiemetics are effective in preventing or reducing many types of nausea and vomiting. Sometimes, several different medicines may be tried to find the one that works best. There are also practical steps you may be advised to take to feel better, including those listed below.

When to call your doctor:

Contact your doctor and seek immediate medical attention if you have a fever of 100.5° F (38°C) or higher, blood (bright red or black) in your vomit or vomit that looks like coffee grounds, severe cramping or acute abdominal pain, dizziness, weakness, confusion, dark urine or if you are not producing urine, or projectile vomiting.

Ways to Manage Nausea and Vomiting

You may be advised to take these steps to feel better:

- **Take an anti-nausea medicine.** Talk with your doctor to learn when to take your medicine. Tell your doctor if the medicine doesn't help. There are different kinds of medicine and one may work better than another for you.
- **Drink plenty of water and fluids.** Drinking will help to prevent dehydration, a serious problem that happens when your body loses too much fluid and you are not drinking enough. Try to sip on water, fruit juices, ginger ale, tea, and/or sports drinks throughout the day.
- **Avoid certain foods.** Don't eat greasy, fried, sweet, or spicy foods if you feel sick after eating them. If the smell of food bothers you, ask others to make your food. Try cold foods that do not have strong smells, or let food cool down before you eat it.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a common side effect of many cancer treatments. Conditions such as anemia, as well as pain, medications, and emotions, can cause or worsen fatigue.

People often describe cancer-related fatigue as feeling extremely tired, weak, heavy, run down, and having no energy. Resting does not always help with cancer-related fatigue. Cancer-related fatigue is one of the most difficult side effects for many people to cope with.

When to call your doctor:

Tell your health care team if you feel extremely tired and are not able to do your normal activities or are very tired even after resting or sleeping. Keeping track of your levels of energy throughout the day will help your doctor assess your fatigue. Write down how fatigue affects your daily activities and what makes the fatigue better or worse.

Ways to Manage Fatigue:

You may be advised to take these and other steps to feel better:

- **Make a plan that balances rest and activity.** Choose activities that are relaxing for you. Many people choose to listen to music, read, meditate, or spend time with people they enjoy. Relaxing can help you save your energy and lower stress. Light exercise may also be advised by your doctor to give you more energy and help you feel better.
- **Plan time to rest.** If you are tired, take short naps of less than 1 hour during the day. However, too much sleep during the day can make it difficult to sleep at night. Choose the activities that are most important to you and do them when you have the most energy. Ask for help with important tasks such as making meals or driving.
- **Eat and drink well.** Meet with a registered dietician to learn about food and drinks that can increase your level of energy. Foods high in protein and calories will help you keep up your strength. Some people find it easier to eat many small meals throughout the day instead of three big meals. Stay well hydrated. Limit your intake of caffeine and alcohol.
- **Meet with a specialist.** It may help to meet with a counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. These experts help people cope with difficult thoughts and feelings. Lowering stress may give you more energy and help you sleep better. Since pain that is not controlled can also be a major source of fatigue, it may help to meet with a pain or palliative care specialist.

Edema (Swelling)

Edema, a condition in which fluid builds up in your body's tissues, may be caused by some types of cancer medication, certain cancers, and conditions not related to cancer.

Signs of edema may include:

- Swelling in your feet, ankles, and legs
- Swelling in your hands and arms
- Swelling in your face, around your eyes, or abdomen
- Skin that is puffy, shiny, or looks slightly dented after being pressed
- Shortness of breath, a cough, or irregular heartbeat

When to call your doctor:

Tell your health care team if you notice swelling. Your doctor will determine what is causing your symptoms, advise you on what steps to take, and may prescribe medicine.

Some problems related to edema are serious. Call your doctor if you feel short of breath, have a heartbeat that seems different or is not regular, have sudden swelling or swelling that is getting worse or is moving up your arms or legs, you gain weight quickly, or you don't urinate at all or urinate only a little.

Ways to Prevent or Lessen Edema:

Steps you can take to prevent or lessen edema-related swelling include:

- **Get comfortable.** Wear loose fitting clothing and shoes that are not too tight. When you sit or lie down, raise your feet with a stool or pillows. Avoid crossing your legs when you sit. Talk with your doctor about wearing special stockings, sleeves, or gloves that help with circulation if your swelling is severe.
- **Exercise.** Moving the part of your body with edema can help. Your doctor may give you specific exercises, including walking, to improve circulation. However, you may be advised not to stand or walk too much at one time.
- **Limit salt (sodium) in your diet.** Avoid foods such as chips, bacon, ham, and canned soup. Check food labels for the sodium content. Don't add salt or soy sauce to your food.
- **Take your medicine.** If your doctor prescribes a medicine called a diuretic, take it exactly as instructed. The medicine will help to move the extra fluid and salt out of your body.

Memory or Cognitive Impairment

Whether you have memory or concentration problems (sometimes described as a mental fog or chemo brain) depends on the type of treatment you receive, your age, and other health-related factors. Cancer treatments may cause difficulty with thinking, concentrating, or remembering things.

These cognitive problems may start during or after cancer treatment. Some people notice very small changes, such as a bit more difficulty remembering things, whereas others have much greater memory or concentration problems.

When to call your doctor:

It's important for you or a family member to tell your healthcare team if you have difficulty remembering things, thinking, or concentrating. Your doctor will assess your symptoms and advise you about ways to manage or treat these problems. Treating conditions such as poor nutrition, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and insomnia may also help.

Ways to Manage Memory or Concentration Problems:

Here are some steps you can take to manage memory or concentration problems:

- **Plan your day.** Do things that need the most concentration at the time of day when you feel best. Get extra rest and plenty of sleep at night. If you need to rest during the day, short naps of less than 1 hour are best. Long naps can make it more difficult to sleep at night. Keep a daily routine.
- **Exercise your body and mind.** Exercise can help to decrease stress and help you to feel more alert. Exercise releases endorphins, also known as "feel-good chemicals", which give people a feeling of well-being. Ask what light physical exercises may be helpful for you. Mind-body practices such as meditation or mental exercises such as puzzles or games also help some people.
- **Get help to remember things.** Write down and keep a list handy of important information. Use a daily planner, recorder, or other electronic device to help you remember important activities. Make a list of important names and phone numbers. Keep it in one place so it's easy to find.