

FACTS ABOUT DIARRHEA

What is diarrhea?

A person is considered to have diarrhea when their bowel movements are increased in fluidity and/or frequency relative to the person's usual pattern, occurring 3 or more times within 24 hours. Other symptoms may often accompany diarrhea, such as fever, vomiting, stomach pain, and loss of appetite.

What causes diarrhea?

Many different things can cause diarrhea. Germs, such as viruses, bacteria, and parasites, are a very common cause of diarrhea. Sometimes a person can have diarrhea without having an infection, such as when diarrhea is caused by certain medications, food allergies or additives, or certain chronic diseases.

Can diarrhea be passed from one person to another?

When diarrhea is caused by a germ, the illness can be spread to other people if the germ gets into the body through the mouth. Germs causing diarrhea can be spread through contaminated food or water. Close contact with a person who has diarrhea may also spread infection. This occurs when a person accidentally puts something that is contaminated with stool in or around his/her mouth. Wash hands properly and sanitize surfaces whenever changing diapers or helping a child use the toilet, as this is a common route of spreading the infection.

Who is at risk for diarrhea?

Anyone can get diarrhea.

How is diarrhea treated?

The key to deciding how to treat diarrhea lies in determining the cause of the diarrhea. Diagnosing the cause of diarrhea can be difficult and sometimes requires repeated stool samples. If the diarrhea is caused by bacteria, sometimes an antibiotic can be used to treat it. Other causes of diarrhea, such as viruses, have no specific treatments and only general comfort measures are recommended. To help prevent dehydration, make sure to drink plenty of fluids.

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How can the spread of diarrhea be reduced?

1. Make sure that both children and adults follow good handwashing practices. Wash hands especially well after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and helping children use the toilet. Supervise and assist children when they wash their hands after toileting or diapering.
2. Make sure hands are washed particularly well before preparing, serving, or eating food.
3. Use a sanitizing solution, 1/4 teaspoon of bleach per quart of cool water, to help minimize germs on surfaces such as tabletops, counters, and toys.
4. Use a stronger sanitizing solution, 1 tablespoon of bleach per quart of cold water, for diaper changing pads and toilet areas.
5. Child care staff should consult with the Communicable Disease Outreach program (425. 339.5278) for additional recommendations on cleaning and sanitizing and illness prevention.

Exclude from group setting?

Any person who has 3 or more loose stools within a 24 hour period needs to be excluded from the child care or school setting. Child cares and schools are not set up to care for children with diarrhea, whether it is from an infection or not.

Handwashing

Handwashing is one of the primary ways to stop the spread of disease. The following steps are recommended for good handwashing:

1. Turn on warm water.
2. Apply soap to hands.
3. Rub soap over tops and palms of hands and around fingernails. Scrub hands for approximately 20 seconds.
4. Rinse hands with running water.
5. Dry hands with a clean, disposable towel.
6. Repeat the process if preparing foods.

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Communicable Disease Outreach Program

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