What is diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea is the passing of abnormally loose or watery stools at increased frequency.

It can be termed as:
• Acute diarrhoea
  - abrupt onset of 3 or more loose stools per day
• Chronic or persistent diarrhoea
  - diarrhoea episodes lasting more than 14 days
• Dysentry
  - passage of acute bloody diarrhoea and often with mucus.

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The basics you need to know
Managing diarrhoea

Prevention
Diarrhoea can be prevented by ensuring cleanliness. Check that the restaurant or eating places that you are visiting is certified as clean by the local authority.

Wash your hands before and after handling any food or drinks.

What causes diarrhoea?

90% of acute diarrhoea are most commonly due to viruses and accompanied by vomiting, fever and abdominal pain or cramps.

The remaining may be due to medications, toxic agents, reduced blood supply (ischaemia) and other conditions.

Infections causing diarrhoea are usually caused by ingestion of contaminated food or water especially if it is raw, undercooked or repeatedly thaw and reheated. These viruses or bacteria attaches itself to the intestine surface, causing inflammation, producing toxins and resulting in active secretion state. Some of the virus or bacteria may penetrate the intestinal wall to cause severe diarrhoea.

Other causes of diarrhoea includes:
- Medication induced
  - associated with antibiotics, laxatives, antacids containing magnesium, painkillers and a variety other medications.
- Food allergies
  - Can occur due to cow’s milk allergy, lactose intolerance or multiple food allergies
- Disorders in absorption
  - These include problems with absorption of sugars, lactose intolerance and the absorption surface
- Specific conditions
  - Conditions such as overactive thyroid, inflammatory bowel diseases, coeliac disease usually will cause chronic persistent diarrhoea

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Diarrhoea is associated with the following symptoms and signs:

1) Frequent loose stool
2) Dehydration
3) Abdominal pain or cramps
4) Borborygmi (audible increase in bowel activity)
5) Lethargy

Managing diarrhoea

Diarrhoea, as it is commonly caused by viruses are usually self limiting and will improve on its own after a few days.

The mainstay of treatment is to ensure that you are well hydrated, replacing the fluid loss and occasionally requiring replacement of the body’s salt (electrolytes) by taking oral rehydration salts.

Severe diarrhoea, especially those caused by bacteria which did not improve after a few days, may require more supportive therapy with intravenous hydration and antibiotics treatment.

Anti motility agents are not encouraged in acute diarrhoea.

When to seek help?

The following patients may require review by a healthcare professional:

1) Profuse diarrhoea with dehydration
2) Diarrhoea persisting for more than 48 hours
3) Diarrhoea with frank blood in stools
4) Diarrhoea with high grade fever
5) Diarrhoea following recent antibiotic use
6) Severe abdominal pain
7) Extreme of ages (young children and very old people).
8) Pregnant ladies

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