



Diarrhea: Acute and Chronic

Diarrhea, often informally referred to as "the runs," is a common health condition that everyone experiences at some point. It's characterized by loose, watery stools and a frequent, urgent need to use the bathroom. While it's usually a short-term issue that resolves within a few days, it can persist for several weeks, becoming a chronic condition for some individuals. This guide aims to comprehensively understand acute and chronic diarrhea, its causes, symptoms, and treatments.

Acute vs. Chronic Diarrhea: A Definition

Diarrhea can be classified into two categories: acute and chronic. Acute diarrhea is a short-term condition that typically lasts 1 to 2 days. It frequently results from a bacterial or viral infection, such as the norovirus in adults or the rotavirus in children. The latter is sometimes called "cruise ship diarrhea" due to its prevalence in well-publicized epidemics.

On the other hand, chronic diarrhea is a long-term condition that persists for several weeks. It's often a symptom of more serious conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or inflammatory bowel diseases like Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. Chronic diarrhea can also be a result of certain dietary factors or medications.

What Triggers Diarrhea?

A variety of conditions and circumstances can trigger diarrhea. Viral infections like rotavirus or norovirus, bacterial infections such as Salmonella and E. coli, and parasitic infections are common causes. Certain diseases of the intestines, food intolerances, and adverse reactions to medications can also lead to diarrhea. In some cases, diarrhea can follow constipation, especially in individuals with IBS.

Recognizing the Symptoms of Diarrhea

The primary symptoms of diarrhea are frequent loose, watery stools and an urgent feeling to evacuate your bowels. Depending on the cause, you may also experience nausea, abdominal pain, cramping, and bloating. In severe cases, diarrhea can lead to dehydration, manifesting as fatigue, dry mouth, increased thirst, and decreased urination.

Diagnosis and Treatment

If you experience diarrhea for over a few days, seeking medical attention is important. Doctors diagnose diarrhea based on medical history, physical examination, and, in some cases,

laboratory tests. These tests can include blood, stool, and breath tests to check for conditions like lactose intolerance.

Treatment for diarrhea primarily involves replacing lost fluids. This means drinking more water or electrolyte-replacement beverages. In more severe cases, intravenous (IV) therapy may be required. If a bacterial infection is the cause, antibiotics may be prescribed. Here is a simple home rehydration solution:

Home made Oral Rehydration Salts Recipe

- Six (6) level teaspoons of Sugar.
- One half (1/2) level teaspoon of Salt.
- 5 cups of clean drinking water

Prevention and When to Seek Medical Attention

Preventing diarrhea often involves practicing good hygiene, such as washing your hands regularly and ensuring your food is cooked thoroughly. If you have chronic diarrhea due to a condition like IBS, managing that condition is key to reducing episodes of diarrhea.

It's important to seek medical attention if your diarrhea lasts more than a few days or if you notice signs of dehydration like dark urine, a dry mouth, or increased thirst. Also, contact your doctor immediately if you see blood in your stool or experience severe abdominal pain.

Conclusion

Diarrhea is a common condition that should not cause embarrassment or prevent individuals from seeking medical evaluation. Understanding the causes, symptoms, and treatments of acute and chronic diarrhea can help individuals effectively manage this condition and seek appropriate medical care when necessary.

Center For Digestive Health & Nutrition

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The Center for Digestive Health & Nutrition is a private medical practice comprised of experienced Gastroenterologists, Nurse Practitioners, and staff members dedicated to preventing and treating digestive disorders. Our physicians have been serving the needs of those in Western Pennsylvania and surrounding areas since 1977, having cared for tens of thousands of individuals with digestive problems. Our mission is to deliver high-quality gastroenterology services efficiently and cost-consciously. We realize the very sensitive nature of GI illness and understand the necessity to provide our services in an environment that stresses patient privacy and confidentiality and where patient satisfaction is the goal.

Appointments can be conveniently scheduled online via our website above. Learn more about digestive issues on Instagram @thedigestivetract

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