

# HIV & Diarrhoea

Your bowels don't have to be the cause of a bad day



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Diarrhoea can be a common side effect with most HIV antiretroviral medications, however this side effect normally goes away within the first couple weeks of therapy.

If you are having reoccurring and persistent bouts of diarrhoea, you should never ignore them. This can cause issues with the absorption of your HIV antiretroviral medications and could be signs of other medical conditions that may need to be treated.

It is important to distinguish between diarrhoea which are frequent loose watery stools usually with pain and sometimes loss of control, and poorly formed bowel motions as the result of other causes.

Long term bowel problems can also have a significant impact on psychological wellbeing, restrict access to everyday life activities and can lead to becoming socially isolated. For people who engage in anal sex, a poor functioning bowel can cause significant anxiety about having a fulfilling sex life.

## Possible causes

- HIV can cause leaky gut syndrome.
- Viral, bacterial or parasitic infections.
- Side effect of medications.
- As a response to stress or anxiety.
- Reduction of the bowel's natural flora from the use of antibiotics.
- Food containing spices such as chilli peppers or curry blends.
- Intolerance to certain dairy products.
- Contaminated food or low public hygiene.

## The bottom line

- Keep taking your medication, keep eating and drink lots of fluids!
- Work with your doctor to identify the cause. Diarrhoea is not always caused by HIV medication; it could be due to an infection.
- If diarrhoea is severe and persists for more than two days, see your doctor. You may need a referral to an HIV gastroenterologist.
- Wash your hands after each time you go to the toilet and before preparing food.

## Be prepared

- Don't ignore early signs of needing to go to the toilet.
- Carry spare underwear, toilet paper and a plastic bag for soiled underwear.
- Plan a trip in advance and allow extra time just in case you have to stop along the way.
- Know where the toilets are located at the regular places you visit – download a toilet finder app – e.g., [ToiletMap](#).
- If you are away from home, try to avoid those things that you know trigger your diarrhoea (e.g., certain foods or beverages).

Try to use any of the over-the-counter antidiarrheal medications such as Imodium or Gastro-Stop or Lomotil sparingly. Diarrhoea is a natural response, and slowing this down too much can cause further problems.

## Practical tips

Keep a diary\* or chart, including the time of:

- what you eat and drink
- when you take medications and other supplements
- how often you are going to the toilet and
- consistency and degree of urgency.

Keeping a diary helps when talking to your doctor, dietician, specialist HIV-gastroenterologist or treatments officer to help find the cause.

\*There are useful apps for this e.g. Colitis Tracker and Bowelle - The IBS tracker (both free).



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## Diet

When you experience diarrhoea, don't stop eating or drinking. Reducing fluid intake will lead to dehydration and feeling weaker. It will not reduce the number of times you go to the toilet.

Your body will keep putting fluid into your gut, even if you stop drinking, which will eventually cause dehydration. Eating the right type of foods can help improve your symptoms.

- Increase your soluble fibre intake, i.e. with psyllium husks like Metamucil, oats, legumes, beans, peas and lentils.
- Keep up fluids to replace lost water and add an electrolyte replacement drink (e.g., coconut water and replacement drinks from the chemist). Electrolytes are small chemicals that are important for cells in your body to work.
- Eat foods that are easy on the stomach like soup, boiled vegetables, low-fibre starches, lean poultry, crackers, soup, and eggs.
- Eat vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, sweet potatoes and pumpkin.
- The BRATT diet: Bananas, white Rice, Apple juice or sauce, Toast and Tea. Managing diarrhoea may need to take an individual approach. Start with a bland diet or foods that are easy to digest, e.g., BRATT and introduce other foods one at a time.
- Clear juices such as apple, peach or pear. Avoid juices with added sugar.
- Some antibiotics can cause the loss of helpful bacteria from the gut. These can be replaced by probiotic drinks which provide "friendly bacteria" and reduce the "harmful bacteria".

## Food to avoid

Some foods can make diarrhoea worse.

- Insoluble fibre can irritate the bowel wall. It is found in cereal, grain, wholemeal varieties of flour, breakfast cereal, bran, bread, pasta, nuts and seeds.
- Reduce alcohol, coffee, tea and caffeine – including carbonated drinks containing caffeine.
- Minimise lactose – the sugar found in milk. You may benefit from lactose-free milk or soy milk.
- Reduce high fat foods, sugary, spicy or deep-fried foods and fatty meats.
- Avoid spicy foods such as chilli peppers or curry blends.
- Avoid eating large amounts of fruits.

For more information phone 02 9206 2177 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or visit [www.positivelife.org.au](http://www.positivelife.org.au)

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The voice of all people living with HIV

Positive Life NSW