

HIV & Gastro

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



Diarrhoea is not always caused by HIV medication, it could be due to an infection.

It is a very common for people living with HIV to have reoccurring and persistent bouts of diarrhoea. It's important to distinguish between diarrhoea which is 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 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.
- Depletion of the bowels natural flora from the use of antibiotics.

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).

Only use Immodium (Gastrostop) before you go out if you are worried about accidents when away from familiar places. Diarrhoea is a natural response, so 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 can help when you're talking to your doctor, dietician or treatments officer to help find the cause. You may need a referral to a specialist HIV-gastroenterologist.

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



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Our tip: download a toilet finder app.

Diet

When you experience diarrhoea, don't stop eating or drinking. Reducing fluid intake will lead to dehydration, feeling weaker and does 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 (e.g. sports drinks or replacement drinks from the chemist).
- 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, e.g. BRAAT and introduce other foods one at a time.
- Clear juices such as apple, peach or pear. Avoid juices with added sugar.

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, deep fried foods and fatty meats.
- Avoid spicy foods.

Further options

- 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".
- Generally the recommendation is: 2 x Yakult for 5 days, 1 x Yakult for the next 5 days and then 1 x Yakult every 2 to 3 days.

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

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The voice of all people living with HIV

Positive Life NSW