

Diarrhea

What is happening

Diarrhea means frequent loose or watery bowel movements.

It can occur for many different reasons in hospice patients, including:

- Diet changes
- Medications
- Infections
- Constipation treatments
- Underlying medical conditions

Diarrhea can lead to:

- Dehydration
- Weakness
- Skin irritation
- Discomfort

Common causes

Diet-related causes

Some foods and drinks may worsen diarrhea, including:

- Dairy products
- Sodas or sugary drinks
- Excess fruit

Medication-related causes

Diarrhea can occur from:

- Antibiotics
- Some liquid medications
- Laxatives or treatment for constipation
- Medications that may now be “too strong” as illness progresses

Tube feeding formulas may also contribute.

Medical causes

- Infection (especially after antibiotic use)

- Cancer-related bowel changes
- Prior abdominal radiation treatments
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Bleeding from the intestines

Sometimes severe constipation can cause:

- Leakage of loose stool around a blockage (“overflow diarrhea”)

What you can do first

- Review medications with the hospice team
- Think about whether:
 - This is a new problem
 - Or worsening of a long-standing issue

Review the diet and consider reducing:

- Dairy products
- Sodas
- Excess fruit

If diarrhea started after constipation, discuss this with the hospice team.

Staying hydrated

Diarrhea can cause dehydration.

Encourage fluids if safe and tolerated, especially fluids containing salt or electrolytes:

- Broth
- Pedialyte
- Sports drinks if appropriate

Normal urination is usually a reassuring sign of hydration.

Skin care and comfort

Frequent diarrhea can irritate the skin.

Helpful supplies may include:

- Barrier creams or ointments
- Baby wipes
- “Butt balm” or A&D ointment

Gentle skin care is important for comfort.

Medications

Anti-diarrhea medications such as Imodium may help and are often available over the counter.

Use medications as directed by the hospice team.

When to call hospice

- Diarrhea continues despite treatment
- Signs of dehydration:
 - Weakness
 - Dry mouth
 - Little urine output
- Nausea or vomiting prevents fluid intake
- Blood is seen in the stool
- New or worsening abdominal pain
- Increasing confusion or agitation