



Caring for the Client with Diarrhea

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Describe the normal process of bowel elimination.
2. Define diarrhea.
3. List three causes of diarrhea and two signs of dehydration.
4. Discuss measures to promote comfort and safety for clients with diarrhea.

A few days after Mrs. Logan returned home from the hospital, she had an episode of diarrhea. This concerned Tonya, her home health aide. Tonya realized that, because Mrs. Logan had been in the hospital, she might have contracted *C. diff* (*Clostridium difficile*), a bacterial infection of the bowel. Tonya notified the nurse of Mrs. Logan's diarrhea. Tests ordered by the physician confirmed *C. diff* infection. Tonya's excellent observations and reporting helped Mrs. Logan to receive prompt treatment, and helped to prevent the infection from being carried to other clients.

This newsletter will discuss diarrhea in the home care client, including normal bowel function, causes of diarrhea, physical effects and treatment. Care of the client with diarrhea will also be covered.

Bowel Elimination

Normal bowel function allows the body to absorb water and nutrients from the diet and to eliminate, or get rid of, solid waste from the body. This process is very important to overall health.

When food is eaten, it passes from the stomach and into the small intestine, or small bowel. This is where water and nutrients from the food are absorbed into the body. The remaining food (waste)



moves on into the large intestine, also called the large bowel or colon. As the waste moves through the intestines, water is removed and the waste becomes a solid mass. It then enters the last part of the bowel, called the rectum. This causes an urge to have a bowel movement, and the solid waste is then eliminated from the body. This solid waste has several names... bowel movement, BM, stool, or feces.



The food moves through the gastrointestinal (GI) tract because of rhythmic contractions of the intestines, called *peristalsis*. It allows the food to move from the stomach, through the intestines, and out of the body.

Diarrhea—Definition and Causes

When peristalsis is too fast, the waste is moved through the intestines too quickly. More water than usual stays in the waste, since the intestines do not have time to remove it. This results in frequent, liquid stools. Diarrhea is defined as the passing of loose, liquid or watery stools, usually 3 or more times per day. Formed or pasty stool that is passed 3 or more times a day is not considered diarrhea. This condition is usually of short duration, lasting less than 2 weeks (acute diarrhea). Diarrhea lasting 2—4 weeks is persistent diarrhea, and if it lasts

longer than 4 weeks, diarrhea is considered chronic.

In the US, acute diarrhea is most commonly caused by infection due to viruses, such as rotavirus and norovirus. Other infectious causes include bacteria, such as *C. diff* and *E. coli*, and parasites, such as giardia. These tend to be more common in people traveling to other countries. Infectious diarrhea can occur due to food poisoning or drinking contaminated water, or may be spread from person to person, such as the norovirus outbreaks on cruise ships.

Persistent and chronic diarrhea may be caused by tube feeding or medications, such as antibiotics or cancer chemotherapy. Bowel disease may also cause chronic diarrhea, including irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. And people with allergies or who have difficulty digesting certain foods, such as lactose or gluten, can also suffer from chronic diarrhea.



Physical Effects, Diagnosis and Treatment

Diarrhea can be just a minor nuisance, or it can be severe enough to cause serious illness and death. Along with the diarrhea, the client may have a fever (with infectious types and ulcerative colitis), nausea/vomiting, abdominal pain, bloating, and bloody stools. Those most at risk for serious illness are young children and the elderly. Diarrhea can result in dehydration due to loss of body water and important chemicals, such as sodium and potassium. Signs include thirst, dry mouth, dark urine, weakness, dizziness, rapid heart rate, decreased blood pressure and confusion. In severe cases, shock, renal failure and seizures may occur.

In most cases, diarrhea lasts only a few days and goes away on its own, so no diagnostic tests or medications may be needed. But if it is severe, lasts more than a few days, or a specific infectious cause is suspected, then medical care is usually required. Diagnostic tests for diarrhea may include blood tests, stool cultures and abdominal imaging, such as X-ray or CT scan. Direct viewing of the intestine may also be done with a flexible scope, such as in a colonoscopy procedure.

Treatment of diarrhea is based on its cause, as well as measures that are taken to prevent dehydration. Antibiotics may be required for bacterial infection. Some bowel diseases may require surgery or drugs that reduce inflammation or suppress the immune system. An increase in oral fluids is usually ordered, or IV fluids may be

used if fluids cannot be taken orally. Medication to decrease peristalsis and reduce diarrhea is often ordered, such as Imodium (loperamide). These drugs are not usually used for diarrhea caused by bacteria or parasites, as they may delay elimination of the infection from the bowel.

Care of the Client

The client with diarrhea needs close monitoring so that signs of dehydration can be spotted as early as possible. Notify the nurse immediately if the client has dry mouth, fatigue, dark urine, or any other signs of fluid loss. Encourage oral fluids frequently, as ordered. To help replace the chemicals lost from the body, fluids such as broth, soup, sports drinks or oral replacement fluids (Pedialyte) may be used rather than plain water. Milk, dairy products, apple juice, alcohol, and beverages with caffeine should be avoided, as these may worsen diarrhea. When the client feels like eating and orders permit, bland, low-fiber foods should be offered. These include bread, crackers, noodles, white rice, lean meats, applesauce and bananas. Fatty or spicy foods should be avoided, as well as high-fiber foods such as whole grains and most raw vegetables and fruits.



Check on the client frequently to see if he/she needs to use the bathroom. The client may have frequent bowel movements that are difficult to control, and may have fecal incontinence. Clean the skin around the anus gently with a gentle cleanser after each bowel movement, since diarrhea is very irritating to the skin. Applying a skin barrier or other ordered cream may help to protect the skin from further irritation. As always, follow Standard



Precautions by using gloves any time you may come in contact with urine or feces. Other protective equipment, such as gown, face mask and goggles, may be needed if spraying or splashing is expected. Also, some conditions, such as *C. diff* infection, require use of contact precautions.

In some cases, diarrhea continues despite treatment measures such as increased oral fluids and medication. The client may be transferred to the hospital if he/she becomes dehydrated or has abdominal pain.

Diarrhea can be a serious, and even fatal, disorder, especially in children and the elderly. Your good observations and care can help to detect signs of dehydration early, keep the client more comfortable, and prevent the spread of illness.



Caring for the Client with Diarrhea

NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- ____ 1. Which of the following best describes the path that food takes through the GI tract?
- A. stomach > large intestine > small intestine > rectum
 - B. small intestine > stomach > rectum > large intestine
 - C. stomach > small intestine > rectum > large intestine
 - D. stomach > small intestine > large intestine > rectum
- ____ 2. Peristalsis is the:
- A. rhythmic contractions of the intestines
 - B. process of absorbing nutrients from the intestines
 - C. solid mass of waste that moves through the intestines
 - D. elimination of solid waste from the body
- ____ 3. As waste moves through the intestines, water is normally added to it as it moves along.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 4. Which of the following most clearly meets the definition of diarrhea?
- A. 3 liquid stools per day
 - B. 4 soft formed stools per day
 - C. 6 pasty stools per day, produced by a breastfed newborn
 - D. 1 hard, dry stool per day
- ____ 5. Diarrhea is often upsetting and uncomfortable for clients, but it cannot harm them physically.
- A. True
 - B. False

- _____ 6. In the US, acute diarrhea is most commonly caused by:
- A. bacteria
 - B. lactose intolerance
 - C. viruses
 - D. medications
- _____ 7. Which of the following is NOT a common sign of dehydration?
- A. rapid heart rate
 - B. dark urine
 - C. dizziness
 - D. increased blood pressure
- _____ 8. Which of the following oral liquids is usually recommended to replace lost fluids and chemicals due to diarrhea?
- A. milk
 - B. water
 - C. broth
 - D. apple juice
- _____ 9. Which of the following foods should be avoided when the client has diarrhea?
- A. bananas
 - B. noodles
 - C. lean meat
 - D. lettuce
- _____ 10. Contact precautions may be required for some clients with diarrhea.
- A. True
 - B. False

