

Chronic Diarrhea

What is chronic diarrhea?

Diarrhea that lasts for more than 2 weeks is considered persistent or chronic.

What causes chronic diarrhea?

Chronic diarrhea has many different causes; these causes can be different for children and adults. Chronic diarrhea sometimes is classified on whether or not it is caused by an infection. The cause of chronic diarrhea sometimes remains unknown.

How is chronic diarrhea spread?

A person drinking water or eating food that is contaminated with stool spreads chronic diarrhea. In general, chronic diarrhea not caused by an infection is not spread to other people.

How is chronic diarrhea diagnosed?

Tests may include blood or stool tests. Stool cultures may be used to test for bacteria; generally three or more stool samples are collected and examined. Special tests may be required to diagnose some parasites. If these initial tests do not reveal the cause of the diarrhea, additional tests may be done, including radiographs (x-rays) and endoscopy.

What is the treatment for chronic diarrhea?

The treatment of chronic diarrhea is determined by its cause. Follow the advice of your health care provider.

- Diarrhea caused by an infection sometimes can be treated with antibiotics. However, the correct diagnosis must be made so that the proper medication can be prescribed.
- Diarrhea not caused by an infection can be more difficult to diagnose and therefore treat. Long-term medical treatment and nutritional support may be necessary. Surgery may be required to treat some causes of chronic diarrhea.

For diarrhea whose cause has not been determined, the following guidelines may help relieve symptoms. Follow the advice of your health care provider.

- Remain well hydrated and avoid dehydration. Serious health problems can occur if the body does not maintain proper fluid levels. Diarrhea may become worse and hospitalization may be required if dehydration occurs.
- Maintain a well-balanced diet. Doing so may help speed recovery.
- Avoid beverages that contain caffeine, such as tea, coffee, and many soft drinks.
- Avoid alcohol; it can lead to dehydration.

Calhoun County Public Health Department

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Are there complications from chronic diarrhea?

The risk of serious complications from chronic diarrhea depends on the cause of the diarrhea and the age and general health of the patient. Chronic diarrhea from some causes can result in serious nutritional disorders and malnutrition. Severely immunocompromised persons, including those with HIV/AIDS and those receiving chemotherapy for cancer or organ transplantation, can be at risk for serious chronic diarrhea. Determining the correct cause of chronic diarrhea is necessary in order to select proper treatment and reduce the risk of serious complications.

How can chronic diarrhea be prevented?

Infections that cause chronic diarrhea usually can be prevented by:

- Always drinking clean safe water that has been properly treated.
- Always using proper food handling and preparation techniques.
- Always maintaining good hand hygiene, including always washing hands properly with soap and water before handling food and after using the toilet or changing a diaper.

How do I get more information on chronic diarrhea?

Calhoun County Public Health Department

Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Phone: 800-CDC-INFO

Website: http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/hygiene/disease/chronic_diarrhea.html

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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