

Dealing with Diarrhea

Over the past 10 years, Ivy Phillips has been treated for Breast cancer as well as Ovarian cancer. And now she's battling ovarian cancer again. Along the way, she's gone through multiple rounds of chemotherapy and learned a lot about how to deal with the side effects.

"It's a lot and it's very taxing. But, you know, some of it is manageable, and you learn the tricks as you move along."-Ivy, Patient

Among the most common side effects are Gastrointestinal or GI issues, including diarrhea.

"Conventional chemo kills cells that grow in the body quickly - and that's the cancer. But the G.I. tract also has cells that turn over quickly."-Dr. Ajai Chari, MD, Oncologist

Damage to those cells by treatment can lead to diarrhea. If you experience it, don't be afraid to tell your healthcare provider.

"I've had patients who somehow seem embarrassed to talk about it. But we would rather know that you're not leaving your home because you're worried about soiling yourself rather than telling us."- Dr. Ajai Chari, MD, Oncologist

That help can come in the form of anti-diarrhea treatments available over the counter or medications in pill form that your provider prescribes.

"These are drugs that slow down the GI tract such that it would reduce the diarrhea frequency. We really want to know - how bad is it? Is it completely liquid? Is it six to eight stools a day, or are we talking soft one to two a day. And based on that, we can recommend different things."- Dr. Ajai Chari, MD, Oncologist

Keeping track of your bouts of diarrhea can help you use the medication more effectively.

"I encourage people to keep a chemo calendar, where you write down when you're taking or getting different drugs, and then noting down when the diarrhea seems to happen. So that if you know there's a pattern that you take drug X on Monday, and Tuesdays and Wednesdays are your bad days, just take the diarrhea pills on those days. You don't have to wait for it to get bad."- Dr. Ajai Chari, MD, Oncologist

Changing your diet may be helpful as well. Go for bland foods that are low in fiber and high in potassium, a key mineral lost during diarrhea. To remember what to eat, think "BRAT," which stands for: Bananas, Rice, Apples and Toast.

"We want easy-to-digest foods that are not going to cause a lot of problems."- Dr. Ajai Chari, MD, Oncologist

Other dietary tips for reducing diarrhea include: eat several small meals a day, so your body isn't trying to handle too

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much at once. Choose foods high in probiotics or “good bacteria” such as yogurt, which may help keep digestion regular. Avoid greasy foods as well as dairy products; jellies and preserves; and desserts and candies. Also drink eight to twelve cups of fluids a day; try a diet of clear liquids, such as water, broth, and weak tea. Avoid drinks high in acid - like tomato or orange juice as well as soft drinks, caffeine, and alcohol.

“How frequently do you have meals throughout the day?”

Working with a nutritionist can help you figure out what dietary changes are most effective for you. Dealing with the issue early on is important because if diarrhea becomes severe or lasts a long time, you can get dehydrated or malnourished. Signs that your diarrhea may be “severe” include: six or more loose bowel movements a day – for two days in a row; blood in your stool; weight loss of five pounds after the diarrhea starts; fever; reduced urine production, or not urinating for eight or more hours; not wanting to drink liquids for a day or longer. If you experience any of these symptoms, let your care team know. To manage the problem, they may adjust the dose or schedule of your chemotherapy. Most cases of diarrhea caused by cancer treatment are mild to moderate and typically start to subside about three weeks after treatment ends.

“These side effects are quite manageable, and we just need to work together as a team to really get those symptoms under control.”- Dr. Ajai Chari, MD, Oncologist