

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET



Department of Health & Human Services

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## Diarrhea

### What is Diarrhea?

Diarrhea is an increased number of loose, watery stools, usually more than three in 24 hours. Stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting and/or fever may be present. It is usually caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites. It can also occur when antibiotics kill the good bacteria in the intestines.

### What should I do if I have symptoms?

Be careful not to spread the disease to others. Most importantly, wash your hands with soap and warm water after using the bathroom or changing diapers and before eating or handling food. It is best if somebody else prepares food while you are sick.

See a doctor to find out the cause of your illness.

### How long after exposure do symptoms first begin?

This varies greatly depending on the cause. The range is from 30 minutes to four weeks.

### How is it spread?

Some foods such as eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, raw fruits and vegetables may contain the bacteria, viruses or parasites that cause diarrhea. The disease can also be spread when people handle food without washing their hands first. Water, especially from lakes, rivers and streams, can also be contaminated with diarrhea producing microorganisms.

### How is it prevented?

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water after using the bathroom or changing diapers and before eating or handling food.
- Cook food thoroughly.
- Wash fruits and vegetables very well.
- Drink water from lakes, rivers and streams only after it has been treated.

### How long is the person contagious?

As long as the bacteria, virus or parasite is present in the stool.

### Are there complications?

Dehydration is the most common complication. Sipping clear liquids (water, broth, tea, apple juice, etc.) can help prevent this.

### Is there a treatment?

The treatment varies with the cause. If your doctor prescribes a medication, ask if you should continue taking it until it is all gone. Some diarrhea (depending on cause) is better not treated as long as you can drink enough liquids.



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## **HAND WASHING INSTRUCTIONS:**

- use soap and running water
- rub your hands vigorously for 20 seconds
- wash all surfaces, including:
  - backs of hands
  - wrists
  - between fingers
  - under fingernails
- rinse well
- dry hands with a paper towel
- turn off the water using a paper towel instead of bare hands

**For more information on Diarrhea, call (248) 858-1406 or toll free 1 (800) 848-5533.**

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