Diarrhea, Chronic

Diarrhea that lasts for more than 2 weeks is considered long lasting (*persistent*) or *chronic*. In healthy people, chronic diarrhea may be a nuisance or a problem. For someone who has a weak immune system, it may be a life-threatening illness.

There are many causes of chronic diarrhea. These may be different for children and adults. Causes of chronic diarrhea can be grouped into two categories: diarrhea caused by an infection and diarrhea not caused by an infection. Sometimes, the cause of chronic diarrhea is unknown.

DIARRHEA CAUSED BY AN INFECTION MAY RESULT FROM:

- **Parasites, such as:**
  - Cryptosporidium parvum.
  - Entamoeba histolytica.
  - Microsporidia.
  - Cyclospora cayetanensis.
  - Giardia Lamblia.
- **Bacteria, such as:**
  - Campylobacter.
  - Escherichia coli.
  - Salmonella enteritidis.
  - Clostridium difficile.
  - Listeria monocytogenes.
  - Shigella.
- **Viral infections, such as:**
  - HIV.
  - Norwalk agent.
  - Rotavirus.

DIARRHEA NOT CAUSED BY AN INFECTION MAY RESULT FROM:

- Antibiotics.
- Crohn's disease.
- Food additives (fructose and others).
- High blood pressure medications.
- Food allergies.
- Colitis.
- Tumors.
- Diabetes, thyroid and other endocrine diseases.
- Reduced blood flow to the intestine.
- Cancer drugs.
- Travel.
- Previous surgery or radiation of the abdomen or gastrointestinal tract.
- Heredity--certain diseases occur more often in related family members.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis may be difficult. It requires that your caregiver take a careful *history* (ask what has been wrong) and perform a physical exam. The types of tests that your caregiver orders will be based on your problems (*symptoms*) and history. Tests may include blood or stool tests. Stool cultures may be used to test for bacteria or to detect parasites. The CDC recommends that three or more stool samples be examined. If these initial tests do not reveal the cause of your diarrhea, additional tests may include radiographs (x-rays) and endoscopy. Endoscopy is a procedure in which a tube is inserted into the mouth or rectum. This allows the doctor, usually a gastroenterologist, to look at the intestine from the inside.

RISK FACTORS FOR CHRONIC DIARRHEA

There are many reasons why people develop chronic diarrhea. They include:

- Persons with severely weakened immune systems (such as those with HIV/AIDS).
- Those taking certain types of chemotherapy or other medications.
- Persons who have recently received an organ transplant.
- Persons who have had a portion of their stomach removed.

- Travelers to underdeveloped countries where the water and food supplies are frequently contaminated.

TREATMENT

The key to treating chronic diarrhea is to determine and treat its cause.

- Diarrhea caused by an infection can often be treated with antibiotics. But the correct diagnosis must be made so the proper medication can be prescribed.
- Diarrhea not caused by an infection is more difficult to diagnose and treat. Long-term medication or surgery may be required. Specific treatment for chronic diarrhea not caused by an infection should be discussed with your caregiver.
- For diarrhea whose cause has not been determined, follow these important treatment guidelines to relieve symptoms:
  - Prevent dehydration. Serious health problems can occur if you do not maintain your body's proper fluid levels. Diarrhea may become worse and hospitalization may be required if dehydration occurs. Many oral rehydration solutions are available at drug stores. Ask your pharmacist or caregiver for the product best for you.
  - Do not drink beverages containing caffeine, such as tea, coffee, and soft drinks.
  - Do not drink alcohol. It causes dehydration.
  - Do not rely on sports drinks and broths alone to maintain adequate fluid balance. They should not be used to prevent SEVERE dehydration.
  - Maintain well-balanced nutrition. Doing so may help you recover more quickly.

HOW IS CHRONIC DIARRHEA SPREAD?

- Chronic diarrhea caused by an infection can be spread by drinking water or eating food contaminated with stool.
- Close contact with a person who has diarrhea may also spread infection. This occurs when a person accidentally puts something that is contaminated with stool in or around his or her mouth.
- In general, chronic diarrhea not caused by an infection is not spread to other people.

PREVENTION

- Drink clean or purified water.
- Use proper food handling techniques.
- Maintain proper hand-washing habits.

This fact sheet is for information only. It is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a caregiver. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have a parasitic infection, consult a health care professional.

Information courtesy of the CDC.

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