



# Diet Strategies for Managing Chronic Diarrhea 208

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International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders ([www.iffgd.org](http://www.iffgd.org))

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Chronic diarrhea may be controlled to some degree through changes in diet and lifestyle. Diarrhea is defined as loose, watery, or frequent bowel movements. The good news is that making changes to what, when, and how much a person eats, and drinks can improve the quality of life for some. All the suggestions listed in this article may not work for everyone. It is important to always consult with your doctor or dietitian before making decisions about your treatment.

*Chronic or recurring diarrhea (loose, watery, or frequent stools) can occur in many different digestive disorders. If you have anything more than mild, short-term diarrhea, you should consult a physician to obtain a diagnosis and receive specific treatment.*

## Role of the BRAT Diet

If you have experienced diarrhea, you may have been advised to try the BRAT diet. This stands for: Banana, Rice, Applesauce, Toast. These foods may slow down the intestines and decrease how often you have bowel movements. The BRAT diet is not very nutritious and should not be used for a long period of time. So as a starting point, here are some extreme diet changes that are *not* recommended:

- Do not avoid all fiber
- Do not limit your diet to only liquids
- Do not cut out all liquids (you can become dehydrated)
- Do not avoid foods with sodium and potassium. These are important electrolytes that can become low when you have diarrhea.

## What Diet Changes May Help

If you have chronic diarrhea, it is a good idea to keep a food diary. This can help you identify problem foods, difficult times of the day, and symptoms. You should share your food and symptom diary with your healthcare

provider or dietitian. This allows them to see if there are any foods that may be causing your symptoms. Below is a list of foods and supplements that may contribute to loose, watery stools. Please keep in mind that everyone is different. Some foods that are troublesome for one person may not cause any problems for another.

## Foods that May Lead to or Worsen Diarrhea in Sensitive Individuals

- Milk and other dairy products
- Legumes (chickpeas, beans, peas, lentils and lupins) and cabbage family vegetables—these are all high in fiber
- Fruits and juices that contain fructose
- Caffeine-containing beverages such as coffee and tea
- Alcoholic beverages such as beer, wine, and liquor
- Fatty meats such as bacon and heavily marbled meats
- High fat foods such as fried foods, pastries, and chips
- Artificial sweeteners such as NutraSweet®, Splenda®, Equal®, sorbitol, etc.
- Sugar-free gums and mints that contain sorbitol, mannitol, or xylitol
- Real black licorice (not the candy)
- Large quantities of nuts or nut butters
- Concentrated sweets
  - Dried fruits such as figs, dates, raisins, and prunes
  - Prune juice

## Foods/Fluids that may Improve Diarrhea:

- Increase fluids to prevent dehydration. Try to drink these fluids between your meals. Liquids with a meal may speed up stomach emptying and possibly worsen diarrhea.

- Eat and/or drink foods and beverages with sodium and potassium. Diarrhea can lead to low levels of both sodium and potassium, so it is important to replace these electrolytes through your diet.
  - Broth (sodium)
  - Sports drinks (sodium and potassium); however, avoid sugar-free drinks which have artificial sweeteners (see list above)
  - Equalyte®, Pedialyte® (sodium and potassium)
  - Bananas (potassium)
  - Nectars (potassium)
  - Boiled or mashed potatoes (potassium)
- Eat lower fiber foods:
  - Yogurt (if you are lactose intolerant, you may want to avoid)
  - Rice
  - Noodles
  - White bread
  - Cream of wheat
  - Smooth peanut butter, a small amount at a time
  - Lean meats
- Drink beverages at room temperature, not hot or cold

**Electrolytes** are minerals in your body that have an electric charge that help to balance the amount of water in your body.

### Supplements that May Help to Control Diarrhea

Probiotics may help prevent antibiotic-associated diarrhea. They are found in yogurts that contain Live Active Cultures (LAC) such as lactobacillus acidophilus. Look for the term LAC on the label of yogurts in the dairy aisle (note: frozen yogurt does *not* contain LAC).

Pectin is a form of fiber found in fruits and some vegetables that may slow the movement of stool in your intestines. It is also sold as a powder in grocery stores. You can find this in the aisle with pudding and gelatin. To help with diarrhea, mix 1 tablespoon of pectin powder with ¼ cup of lemon water and drink it 20–30 minutes before a meal.

### Other Ways to Help Control Diarrhea

The size and number of meals you eat during the day can also help control your diarrhea. Try to eat smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day. For example, instead of eating 3 large meals, try having 6 small meals spread out during the day. Try to rest after meals by staying seated for 20-30 minutes after eating. Relaxing after

eating can slow the movement of your stomach and intestines, which may help with your diarrhea.

### The Bottom Line

To help improve your diarrhea and to prevent problems related to your symptoms, consider the following:

- Keep a food and symptom diary to help identify which foods, drinks, and supplements may be leading to or worsening your diarrhea
- Eat smaller, more frequent meals during the day
- Sit and relax for 20-30 minutes after you eat
- Drink plenty of fluids in between your meals
- Eat and drink foods and beverages that contain sodium and potassium

Remember, generalized dietary advice does not work for everyone. Each person is unique and a strategy that works for one may not be effective for another. It is also important to talk to your healthcare provider or dietitian about your symptoms. They will be able to identify the cause of your diarrhea and may be able to help you figure out dietary and other changes that may decrease your symptoms and improve your quality of life.

IFFGD's **Dietitian Listing** is a resource that allows you to search for a dietitian that is in your area or treats a specific condition.  
<https://www.iffgd.org/resources/dietitian-listing.html>

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### About IFFGD

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