

Heathgate Medical Practice Self-care leaflet – Diarrhoea

This range of leaflets created by our clinical team provide useful information on a range of conditions that can in most cases be managed by patients at home. Where symptoms persist after a period of self-care or after advice from the local pharmacist, you should consider calling the surgery.

What is diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea describes passing looser or more frequent stool (faeces) than is normal for you. Diarrhoea is common and affects people from time to time. It is usually self-limiting but can be un-pleasant until it passes.

The most common cause is a bowel infection, also known as gastroenteritis, which can be caused by bacteria or parasites.

Gastroenteritis is more likely to be picked up if you visit or live where there are lower standards of hygiene or sanitation.

Diarrhoea can also be a symptom of a food allergy, anxiety, medication or a long term medical condition.

What are the symptoms?

Diarrhoea is when you pass looser or more frequent stools. This may be associated with stomach cramps, loss of appetite, headache and sometimes nausea and vomiting. When you have diarrhoea you are likely to lose more fluid in your motions and this may cause dehydration.

Most diarrhoea is self-limiting and will resolve within a week.

How can I help manage my symptoms?

Most cases of diarrhoea will clear up within a few days without any treatment or advice from a health professional.

Diarrhoea can cause dehydration so you should take frequent small sips of water to prevent this. A pharmacist may recommend an oral rehydration solution if you are particularly at risk of dehydration. You should eat solid food as soon as you feel able to, starting with small amounts of plain food.

If you are breast or bottle feeding a child with diarrhoea you should feed them as normal. Medicines to slow diarrhoea such as loperamide can help to reduce diarrhoea but in most cases are not necessary.

How can I prevent diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea is often caused by an infection so maintaining good hygiene practices will help reduce your chance of infection and transmission of the illness to others.

This includes washing your hands after visiting the toilet and before meals or snacks and practising good water hygiene when abroad.

When should I contact a health care professional?

You should contact a health professional when you have diarrhoea if you are concerned about yourself or your child. It is important to seek advice if diarrhoea is associated with:

- Blood in the stool.
- Frequent or persistent vomiting.
- Severe stomach pain.
- Dark black stool.
- Signs of dehydration including drowsiness, feeling lightheaded and passing urine infrequently.
- If you have a long term medical condition which predisposes you to dehydration (including diabetes, chronic kidney disease and heart failure) or you are very young or old.

Further advice on managing diarrhoea is available at www.nhs.uk