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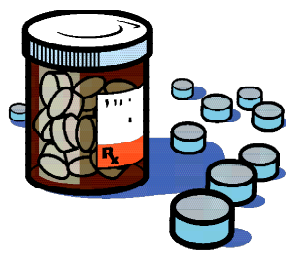
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Diarrhea

Sooner or later, we are all going to be struck by an attack of diarrhea, which is the frequent passage of loose, watery stools. Fortunately, modern science has made available several **antidiarrheal medications** which are very effective in slowing the activity of the intestines,



and in this fashion, stopping the diarrhea. Examples of these drugs are Lomotil and Imodium.

Patients who develop diarrhea often ask why doctors cannot just prescribe this type of medication to make the diarrhea go away. Although treating diarrhea with these drugs can often provide very rapid relief, in some types of diarrhea, these same medications may actually prolong the duration of diarrhea and cause very severe illness, possibly even fatal.

Diarrhea which comes and goes is usually not serious. For example, the diarrhea which occurs during times of emotional stress is generally caused by "nerves". Diarrhea which follows the consumption of milk or other dairy products is caused by a difficulty in digesting lactose, a type of sugar contained in milk.



Diarrhea accompanied by cramping after eating leafy vegetables, beans, bran and the like, is probably irritable bowel syndrome. Medication to relax the intestines, to relax the total patient, or to aid in the digestion of milk, is often used to treat these conditions, but antidiarrheal medications are usually not required.

Diarrhea of short duration, without severe pain, fever or blood in the stool, may be caused by a virus or by food poisoning. Vomiting may be present. Such cases usually respond well to



Pepto-Bismol or Kaopectate. At times, antidiarrheal medications may be required, but should be used only for short periods of time. Diarrhea which lasts more than a few days should be brought to the attention of your doctor.

Diarrhea associated with fever, significant abdominal pain, or with the passage of blood is to be taken very seriously. Diarrhea which begins after a course of antibiotics can also be serious.

These types of diarrhea may be caused by bacterial infection. The diarrhea is part of the body's attempt to rid itself of the infection, and taking antidiarrheal medications alone can make the infec-

tion worse. Infectious diarrhea requires specific therapy directed toward the specific agent causing the infection.

At times, diarrhea with or without bleeding may be the first sign of a serious illness such as inflammatory bowel disease, for example, ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease. At other times, certain types of colon polyps or even colon cancer can present with diarrhea as one of the initial symptoms.

For these reasons, your doctor may recommend diagnostic testing in order to define the exact cause of the diarrhea.



Such testing may include stool cultures, blood tests, x-rays or endoscopic studies (sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy). The test results will permit treatment appropriate to the cause of the diarrhea, rather than simply controlling the symptoms with antidiarrheal medications, and may help guide any long-term therapy which may be indicated.