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## Patient education: Antibiotic-associated diarrhea (C. difficile infection) (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

**What is antibiotic-associated diarrhea?** — Diarrhea describes bowel movements that are runny or watery, and happen 3 or more times in a day. There are different causes of diarrhea. Antibiotic-associated diarrhea can happen when people are taking or have just finished taking certain antibiotic medicines. Most often, this type of diarrhea is caused by an infection with bacteria called "C. difficile." C. difficile normally lives in the intestines ([figure 1](#)). When people are on antibiotics, the C. difficile in their intestines can overgrow.

People can get antibiotic-associated diarrhea even if they don't take antibiotics. They can get C. difficile infection if they touch infected people or surfaces and then don't wash their hands.

**What are the symptoms of antibiotic-associated diarrhea?** — The most common symptoms are:

- Watery diarrhea (3 or more bowel movements for 2 or more days)
- Mild belly cramps

People can also have more severe symptoms, such as:

- Blood or pus in their bowel movements
- Fever
- Belly pain, nausea, or loss of appetite
- Dehydration — This is when the body loses too much water. It can cause people to have dark yellow urine and feel thirsty, tired, dizzy, or confused.

Sometimes people have C. difficile infection but don't have any symptoms. These people can still spread the infection to others.

**Is there a test for antibiotic-associated diarrhea?** — Yes. Your doctor or nurse can test you for C. difficile infection by doing tests on a sample of your bowel movement.

**Is there anything I can do on my own to get better?** — Yes. To help yourself get better, you can:

- Drink a lot of liquids that have water, salt, and sugar. Good choices are water mixed with juice, flavored soda, and soup broth. If you are drinking enough, your urine will be light yellow or almost clear.
- Try to eat a little food. Good choices are potatoes, noodles, rice, oatmeal, crackers, bananas, soup, and boiled vegetables.
- Ask your doctor if you should take "probiotics." Probiotics are bacteria that are good for the intestines.

**Should I see a doctor or nurse?** — See your doctor or nurse if you have:

- Many runny or watery bowel movements in a day

- Blood or pus in your diarrhea
- Fever
- Severe belly pain or a swollen belly
- Nausea

You should also see your doctor or nurse if you have any of the symptoms of dehydration listed above.

**How is antibiotic-associated diarrhea treated?** — If you are taking an antibiotic that could be causing your diarrhea, your doctor will stop it. He or she might switch you to another antibiotic.

He or she will also treat your C. difficile infection with medicines. If your symptoms are severe, you might need to be treated in the hospital.

**Can antibiotic-associated diarrhea be prevented?** — Sometimes. To help reduce your chances of catching or spreading C. difficile infection, you can:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially after you use the bathroom and before you eat. Do not rely on alcohol-based hand rubs, because they have not been proven to prevent the spread of C. difficile.
- Follow the rules about washing hands and wearing gloves if you visit someone in the hospital who has C. difficile infection.

**What happens if my diarrhea comes back?** — If your diarrhea comes back after treatment, let your doctor or nurse know. He or she will probably use medicines to treat it again. But you might need to take the medicines for longer.

You might also have heard of a treatment called "fecal transplant." This involves transplanting bowel movements (called "feces") from a healthy person into your intestine. It is often done in the hospital or doctor's office. This might be an option if your diarrhea keeps coming back and medicines don't help.

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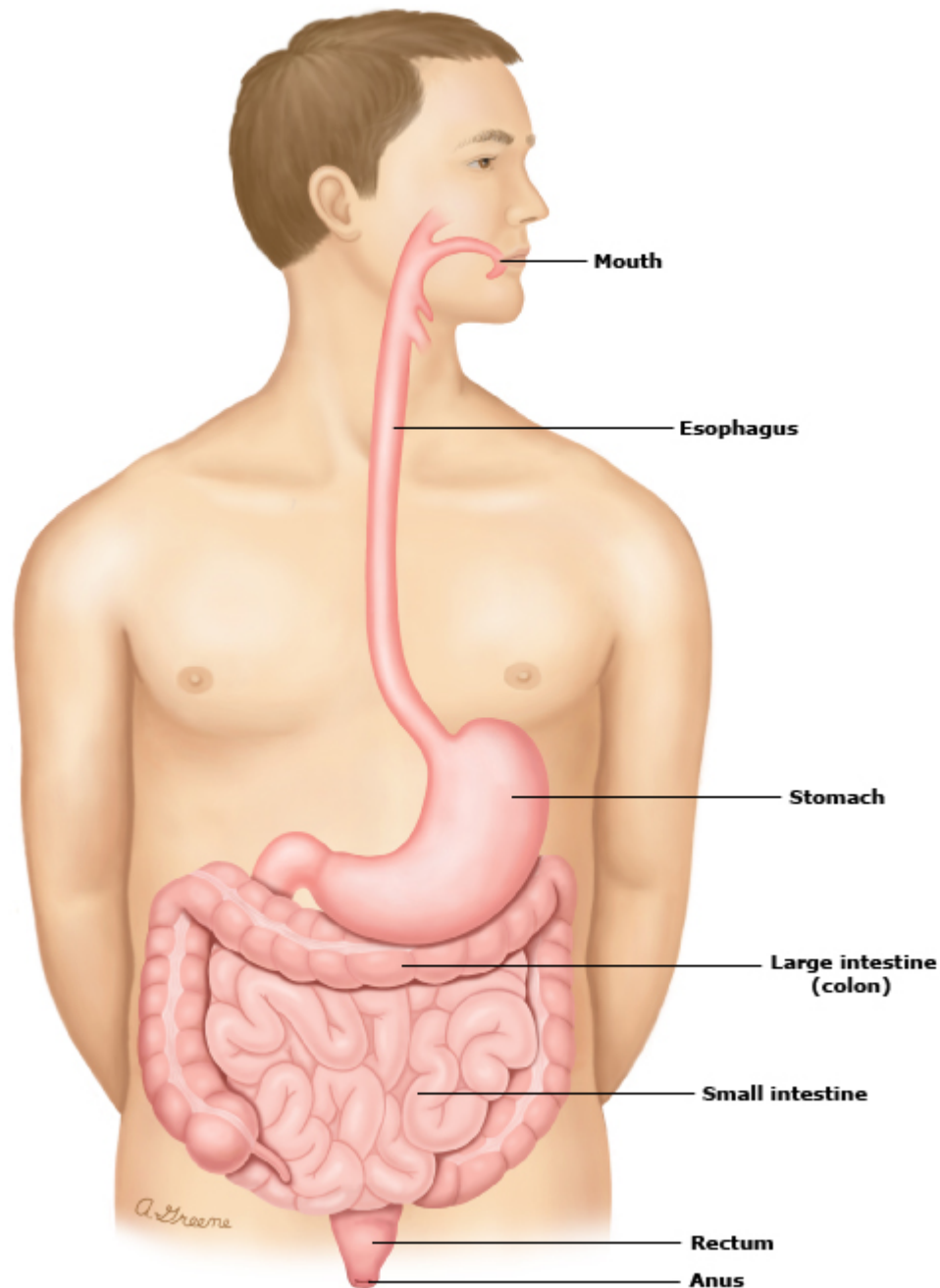
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## GRAPHICS

### Digestive system

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This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

Graphic 66110 Version 4.0