

Diarrhea

An increased movement of stool and excessive loss of water characterize diarrhea. Patients usually suffer from larger bowel movements and may have to go to the toilet more frequently. In most people, diarrhea is usually due to an infection in the digestive system (stomach, small and large intestine), which can be caused by a bacterium, a parasite, a fungus or a virus.

Diarrhea is relatively common in people with HIV, especially in people with a low CD4 count, and can be more or less serious (from semi-loose to completely liquid stool). Other common symptoms include stomach pains, a loss of appetite and a loss of weight. It is very important to see a doctor if diarrhea becomes persistent for several days.

Doctors used to believe that in most people with advanced AIDS, diarrhea was due to the effects of HIV on the intestine. This point of view has been rejected and a larger number of factors are now taken into account. In some cases, diarrhea can be a side effect of anti-HIV agents such as nelfinavir (Viracept), ritonavir (Norvir), ddI in pills (Videx), foscarnet (Foscavir) and interferon alpha (Roferon or Intro). It can also be due to bacterial, parasitic, fungal or viral infections. Finally, there are many other causes which can also result in the apparition of diarrhea.

Diagnostic

It can sometimes be difficult to determine the real causes of diarrhea. It is highly recommended that your doctor first look for every possible causes until he finds the most probable one. For a better diagnostic, it is preferable to analyze a recent sample of stool.

Although infectious agents cannot always be found in the stool, they usually show in the intestinal tissue (mucous). In that case, your doctor may also take a rectal biopsy if necessary, which consists in taking a sample of the tissue either orally to the stomach or the small intestine (endoscopy), or by rectal way up to the rectum or the colon in the lower part of the intestines (sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy). If the analysis shows no infectious organism and you are under treatment, your doctor may conclude that your diarrhea is due to the treatment.

However your doctor must take every factor into account. He will have to know what you have eaten and drunk the few days prior to the analysis and/or in the course of the diarrhea. Indeed, certain types of food and drinks may cause diarrhea.

Treatment

To treat diarrhea efficiently you must take three aspects into account:

Causes, symptoms and effects

Diarrhea is usually caused by a number of opportunistic infections commonly including parasitic and bacterial infections such as *Cryptosporidium*, *Microsporidium*, *Shigella*, *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella*. The other opportunistic infections which can result in diarrhea and also affect other body parts, are caused by the *Citomegalovirus* (CMV) and the *Micobacterium avium intracelulare* (MAI). Those agents penetrate the body when the immune system has been seriously affected by AIDS and infect it.

If your diarrhea is due to anti-HIV drugs such as protease inhibitors (PI), your doctor will probably decide to reduce the doses or offer you a new treatment. In some cases a change will not be necessary. Indeed some drugs can be associated to certain types of food, drinks and/or specific food complements (calcium, for instance), therefore facilitating their absorption and avoiding gastrointestinal effects. Your doctor should adapt your treatment to you as best as possible.

What happens if diarrhea is not treated?

The most serious short-term consequence is dehydration due to an excessive loss of water, salts and vitamins, which are essential to the body. If it is not treated, dehydration will rapidly result in a loss of weight (wasting syndrome). If diarrhea persists for too long, dehydration can finally result in the patient's death.

Therefore, diarrhea can become a very serious problem if it is not treated in time. The most important is to stop diarrhea as soon as possible and regain a normal level of water and salts to avoid major problems. It is thus highly recommended to go to your closest health center and ask for medical support. If you don't speak the language of the country where you are staying at or you don't know which center to go, or you are scared because you don't have residency papers, go to any immigration support associations and tell them about your situation. They can help you.