16.7: Diarrhea

Diarrhea is defined as having more than three unformed stools in 24 hours. It can cause dehydration, skin breakdown, and electrolyte imbalances. Diarrhea is caused by increased peristalsis causing the stool to move too quickly through the large intestines so that water is not effectively reabsorbed, resulting in loose, watery stools.

Many conditions can cause diarrhea, such as infectious processes (bacteria, viruses, and protozoa), food poisoning, medications (such as antibiotics and laxatives), food intolerances, allergies, anxiety, and medical conditions like irritable bowel disease and Crohn's disease, or dumping syndrome for patients receiving tube feeding. Antibiotic therapy also places patients at risk of developing *Clostridium difficile* (C-diff) due to the elimination of normal flora in the gastrointestinal tract. Patients with C-diff have very watery, foul-smelling stools, and transmission-based precautions are implemented to prevent the spread of infection.

**Note**

Read more about C-diff and transmission-based precautions in the "Infection" chapter in this text.

**Interventions**

Treatment of diarrhea includes promoting hydration with water or other fluids (e.g., sports drinks) that improve electrolyte status. Intravenous fluids may be required if the patient becomes dehydrated. Medications such as loperamide, psyllium, and anticholinergic agents may be prescribed to treat diarrhea causing dehydration. In some cases, rectal tubes may be prescribed to collect watery stool. However, strict monitoring is required due to possible damage to the rectal mucosa.
Note

Read about medications used to treat diarrhea in the "Gastrointestinal" chapter in Open RN *Nursing Pharmacology*.