

## **Diarrhoea**

Diarrhoea is characterised by the passing of watery, unformed stools at frequent intervals. Acute diarrhoea is a common problem, which affects most people at some time or another. It is usually self-limiting but can be an inconvenience, especially when abroad on holiday. Bacteria or viruses usually cause acute diarrhoea. Rotaviruses and *Escherichia coli*, *Shigella* and *Salmonella* are the most common cause. These micro-organisms are usually ingested with contaminated food or drink. However, non-microbiological causes include a change of climate, stress, hot spicy food, excess alcohol consumption and certain medicines like antibiotics.

In addition to watery, unformed stools, other symptoms may include abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting and headaches. A 24-hour break from all food and drink, except for water and soft drinks, is advisable with acute diarrhoea. Milk should be avoided.

OTC treatments for diarrhoea include opiates, such as morphine or codeine, which delay the intestinal transit time, allowing more water to be absorbed from the stools. Adsorbents such as kaolin, attapulgite and charcoal act by adsorbing the toxins that the bacteria produce. Antimuscarinics like belladonna alkaloids reduce the activity of the colon and are often used in conjunction with other ingredients. The opiate derivative loperamide is considered by many to be the short-term treatment of choice for adults with uncomplicated, acute diarrhoea.

The greatest risk with diarrhoea is in the very young and the elderly with the loss of body fluids and electrolytes. This may lead to additional symptoms of headache and tiredness. There are a number of oral rehydration products on the market, either as soluble tablets or sachets. These are a combination of salts and glucose and help replace those lost during the diarrhoea. Directions on how to make up the solution and how much to be taken is given for each product and should be followed closely. For infants and young children, it may be necessary to first boil and cool the water to be used to make up the electrolyte replacement sachets.