cramps, nausea, vomiting, fever, blood in the stool or weakness.

Which infections cause diarrhoea?

There are many infections that can cause diarrhoea. These include the virus cytomagalovirus (CMV), the parasitic infections cryptosporidiosis and isosporiasis, and Mycobacterium avium complex (MAC). Other bacteria and parasites that cause diarrhoeal symptoms in otherwise healthy people may cause more severe, prolonged or recurrent diarrhoea in people with damaged immune systems.

How will I know which infection is causing my diarrhoea?

It is important to determine the cause of diarrhoea so that the best treatment can be offered. A doctor will likely examine a stool sample to determine whether diarrhoea-causing organisms are present. If the stool test does not help determine the cause, a doctor may need to take small samples of tissue from the stomach or intestines to detect diarrhoea-causing organisms or determine if cancer is present.

What about treatments for diarrhoea?

If doctors identify an organism as the cause of a person's diarrhoea, they prescribe the antibiotics known to be effective against that organism. For example, a bacterial infection might require the use of an antibiotic including cotrimoxozole or doxycycline. For certain parasitic infections, the drug metronidazole is often given and is usually taken three times a day for a week.

Regardless of the underlying cause, there are treatments to help control the diarrhoea. The drugs listed in the last paragraph help treat the infection; there are also drugs to help control the symptom (diarrhoea). Drugs such as loperamide and codeine can help slow diarrhoea. These are recommended by the HIV/AIDS Policy Guideline.

To avoid dehydration during bouts of diarrhoea, you can prepare a sugar-and-salt solution at home to help replace the fluids lost by your body. First, boil a litre or more of water in a pot. For every litre of water boiled, add 1 teaspoon of salt and 8 teaspoons of sugar. Let the mixture cool and drink the water regularly.

It is also helpful for anyone with diarrhoea to understand the importance of adequate fluid intake as well as small, frequent nutritious meals. Most patients with diarrhoea should avoid gas-causing foods, fats and dairy products.

Can infections that cause diarrhoea be prevented?

Water and foods are the most common source of germs that can cause diarrhoea. To help avoid these germs, especially if your immune system is damaged, consider some of the following tips:

Water: Boiling is the most reliable method to make water safe to drink. Bring water to a vigorous boil, and then allow it to cool; do not add ice. At high altitudes, allow water to boil vigorously for a few minutes or use chemical disinfectants (e.g., iodine or chlorine). Adding a pinch of salt or pouring water from one container to another will improve the taste.

Food: Food should be purchased and prepared with care. Any raw food could be contaminated, particularly in areas of poor sanitation. Foods of particular concern include salads, uncooked vegetables and fruit, unpasteurised milk and milk products, raw meat, and shellfish. If you peel fruit yourself, it is generally safe. Food that has been cooked and is still hot is generally safe.