In addition to the previously mentioned pharmacological medications to treat constipation, some nonpharmacological treatments for constipation include exercising, laughing (because it massages the intestines and thus encourages peristalsis), increasing dietary fiber, drinking more fluids, decreasing consumption of dairy products, and drinking warmed prune juice.

CRITICAL THINKING

Patients can become dependent on laxatives. Why is this problematic? What are some nonpharmacological treatments for constipation?

Medications to Treat Diarrhea

The opposite of constipation is **diarrhea,** which is an increase in the frequency and fluidity of bowel movements. Almost all individuals have diarrhea at one time or another, but if it occurs over several days, the body can lose too much fluid and too many electrolytes. This loss can occur within several hours in small children and infants.

Diarrhea is a symptom, not a disease. Certain chemicals, inflammation, infections, and other medications can cause diarrhea. Anti-infective therapy frequently causes diarrhea. Anxiety and circulatory disorders can cause diarrhea as well.

Stools of excessive volume and fluidity are more than just a bother. The cramping that frequently accompanies diarrhea can be very painful. Diarrhea can signal that the person has eaten spoiled or contaminated food and has an intestinal infection. In small children and the elderly, diarrhea can cause life-threatening loss of valuable fluid and electrolytes. Fortunately, several available medications, such as opioid-related antidiarrheals and absorbents, can help treat diarrhea.

Opioid-related antidiarrheal medications are highly effective and are used for the most serious cases of diarrhea. They work by inhibiting GI motility, decreasing peristalsis, and slowing the function of the GI system, thus allowing more time for water to be reabsorbed through the intestinal wall. An example is loperamide (Imodium), which is taken orally and is available over the counter (OTC), as well as by prescription. Another example is diphenoxylate with atropine (Lomotil), which comes in tablet form and is available only by prescription because of the addictive qualities of this drug. Side effects include dizziness, dry mouth, agitation, numbness, drowsiness, and tachycardia.

Absorbents

Absorbents, such as bismuth (Pepto-Bismol) (Drug Spotlight 19.1) or kaolin and pectin (Kaopectate), are taken after every bowel movement to absorb toxins or bacteria and to coat the walls of the GI tract. Because the treatment focuses on the cause of the diarrhea, medications may also include antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, or antiparasitics. The most common use of antibiotics for diarrhea occurs with "traveler's diarrhea." Exposure to contaminated water or food (often in less-developed countries with poor sanitation infrastructure) leads to bacterial, viral, or parasitic infections. Ciprofloxacin (Cipro), ofloxacin (Floxin), and azithromycin (Zithromax Z-Pak) are commonly used antibiotics, depending on the destination of the traveler. Ulcerative colitis is an example of inflammation that causes diarrhea and is treated with anti-inflammatory drugs such as sulfasalazine (Azulfidine), mesalamine rectal (Canasa, Rowasa), balsalazide (Colazal), and olsalazine (Dipentum). Antiparasitic medications are discussed later in this chapter (also see Chapter 17 for more information).

Medications to Treat Nausea and Vomiting (Antiemetics)

Nausea, although an uncomfortable feeling that vomiting is imminent, is not dangerous. Sometimes nausea is caused by unusual smells, pregnancy hormones, or emptiness of the stomach. **Emesis,** or vomiting, occurs when the patient ejects the contents of the stomach.

Antiemetics decrease nausea and vomiting and are also used to treat motion sickness. Examples of antiemetics include phenothiazines such as prochlorperazine (Compazine), antihistamines such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine), trimethobenzamide (Benzacot, Tigan, Ticon), cannabinoids, phosphorated carbohydrate solution (Emetrol), and 5-hydroxytryptamine-3 (5-HT_3, serotonin) receptor antagonists such as ondansetron (Zofran).