

Nausea and Vomiting, the Basics

Almost everyone has had episodes of nausea or dealt with someone else with this problem. Following you will find some basic information about possible causes as well as when to become concerned and seek medical help for yourself or the person showing these symptoms.

Definitions:

- Nausea is the sensation of being about to vomit. It can occur alone or accompany vomiting, indigestion, or other gastrointestinal symptoms.
- Vomiting is the forceful expulsion of gastric (stomach) contents.
- Regurgitation is the return of contents from the esophagus to the back of the throat with little effort.

Causes of nausea and vomiting:

There are a several different causes of nausea and vomiting. Below is a list of some of the most common causes:

I. Medications and other agents:

- Chemotherapy (intravenous therapy used for cancer, etc)
- Pain medications
- Some heart medications
- Hormones such as oral contraceptives
- Antibiotics (especially sulfonamides, erythromycin, tetracycline)
- Anticonvulsants, theophylline, antiparkinsonian drugs
- Food poisoning

II. Infectious causes

- Viral infections
- Bacterial infections
 - Especially ear infections

III. Disorders of the gut

- Bowel obstruction
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Ulcers and dyspepsia (indigestion)
- Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas)
- Hepatitis
- Gall bladder disease
- Cancer

IV. Central nervous system causes

- Migraine headaches
- Seizure disorders
- Infections such as meningitis
- Brain tumor, stroke or other brain trauma
- Anxiety disorders, depression
- Pain, especially acute pain

V. Inner Ear Disorders

- Motion sickness
- Labyrinthitis (which is a form of vertigo) or Meniere disease
- Tumors

VI. Miscellaneous

- Pregnancy
- Metabolic disorders such as hyperthyroidism (excess thyroid hormones)
- Postoperative nausea and vomiting
- Cyclic vomiting syndrome
- Some cardiac diseases
- Starvation

Getting help:

If symptoms of nausea and/or vomiting last 2 days or if the person is not able to take in any fluids; medical attention should be sought immediately. Medical help should be obtained even sooner if the following signs or symptoms are present:

- Abdominal or chest pain
- Throwing up blood or something that looks like tar
- Bowel movements that are bloody or black
- Temperature over 101 degrees F
- Severe headache or stiff neck
- Very fatigued or difficulty getting up or staying awake
- Signs of dehydration are present
 - Being very thirsty, having dry mouth or tongue
 - Muscle cramps
 - Excessive fatigue, dizziness or confusion
 - Urine is very dark yellow or there is no urination in over 5 hours

Treatment:

Dehydration happens when the body loses more water than it takes in from eating and drinking. It can occur quickly with vomiting, especially if diarrhea is also present. Dehydration can be mild and not cause problems; but if not treated, it will progress. Severe dehydration is a medical emergency and can be life-threatening.

To prevent dehydration; encourage drinking a lot of liquids. If there has been a lot of vomiting and especially if accompanied by diarrhea, the body's potassium stores can be depleted. To help treat this, drinks such as Gatorade or other sports drinks can help. Drinks such as coffee or those with caffeine should be avoided as the caffeine acts as a diuretic causing increased urination.

If able to eat, start with foods with a lot of fluid such as jello, popsicles, or soup. Then progress to soft, bland foods such as plain yogurt, bread, and saltine crackers.

Strong smells such as perfume should be avoided.

Medications can help control the symptoms of nausea. These medications include: Compazine, Phenergan, metoclopramide, scopolamine, Benadryl, and Zofran (ondansetron) to name just a few.