



Nausea and Vomiting

Many people getting chemotherapy (or chemo) worry about nausea and vomiting more than any other side effect. Whether you have these side effects and how bad they might be depend on the chemo drugs you are getting and how each drug affects you. There are a lot of drugs that help prevent or treat nausea and vomiting, and today these side effects happen much less often than in the past. Still, nausea and vomiting are side effects that sometimes happen with chemo.

Nausea is having a sick feeling in your stomach or a wave-like feeling in your stomach and the back of your throat. Nausea can make you sweat, feel dizzy or weak, and have more saliva in your mouth than usual. It can happen even when you're not thinking about food. It can lead to retching, vomiting, or both.

Retching is a rhythmic movement of the diaphragm (the breathing muscle at the bottom of your rib cage) and stomach muscles.

Vomiting is throwing up. Fluids and any food left in the stomach are forced out through the mouth. Vomiting can be acute, which means it starts within minutes or a few hours after you get chemo. Or it can be delayed, which means it starts 24 hours or more after chemo and sometimes goes on for days. Sometimes you can get both kinds of vomiting after chemo. You can vomit even if you haven't eaten anything and are not feeling sick to your stomach.

Anticipatory vomiting is when just thinking about treatment causes you to throw up. Sights, sounds, and smells can also trigger this type of vomiting. Sometimes just seeing the treatment room can make it happen.

What you can do for a sick stomach

- If you have a sick stomach in the morning, try eating something dry, such as toast or crackers, before getting up. (Don't do this if you have a dry mouth or sores in your mouth or throat.)
- Eat small, frequent meals. Snack before bedtime.
- Drink cold, clear liquids and sip slowly. (Clear liquids are those you can see through, like ginger ale, apple juice, broth, tea, etc.) Also try popsicles or gelatin.
- Stick with foods you like.
- Many people getting chemo find that red meat and meat broths taste bad. Try other protein sources, like fish, chicken, beans, and peanut butter.

- Suck on hard candy with pleasant smells, such as lemon drops or mints. This can help get rid of bad tastes and smells.
- Eat food cold or at room temperature to decrease its smell and taste. Avoid fatty, fried, spicy, or very sweet foods.
- Try to rest quietly in a chair for at least an hour after each meal. Don't lie flat for at least 2 hours after eating.
- Distract yourself with soft music, a favorite TV program, or a visit from a family member or friend.
- Relax and take slow, deep breaths if you feel sick to your stomach.
- Be sure your doctor knows about your sick stomach because there are medicines that can help. Take your medicine at the first sign of nausea – it may keep you from vomiting.
- If you feel sick to your stomach just before doctor visits, ask about medicines or other ways to help with this problem.

What you can do if you are throwing up

- Lie on your side if you are in bed, so you will not inhale or swallow vomit.
- Ask that anti-vomiting drugs be prescribed as suppositories or patches, if possible.
- Take liquids as ice chips or frozen juice chips.
- Start taking 1 teaspoon of cool liquid every 10 minutes after you stop throwing up. Slowly increase it to 1 tablespoon every half hour. If you're able to keep that down after an hour or so, slowly try larger amounts.

What the person caring for you can do

- Cook meals for the patient when they are feeling sick, or ask others to help with this. Use kitchen vent fans to keep food smells away from the patient.
- Cover or remove foods with strong or unpleasant smells.
- Have the patient try using plastic forks and spoons if metal ones cause a bitter taste.
- Weigh the patient at the same time each day if they have been throwing up. Fast weight loss may be a sign of fluid loss (dehydration).
- Talk to the doctor about medicines to help prevent vomiting.
- Watch the patient for dizziness, weakness, or confusion.
- Try to help the patient avoid constipation and dehydration. Either of these can make nausea worse.

Call the doctor if the patient

- Might have inhaled some of the vomit
- Vomits more than 3 times an hour for 3 or more hours
- Vomits blood or something that looks like coffee grounds
- Cannot take in more than 4 cups of liquid or ice chips in a day
- Cannot eat for more than 2 days
- Cannot take their medicines
- Becomes weak, dizzy, or confused
- Loses 2 or more pounds in 1 to 2 days (a sign they are losing too much fluid)
- Has dark yellow urine and doesn't urinate as often as usual

The best way to control nausea and vomiting is to stop them before they start. The good news is that both symptoms can almost always be helped by changing the way you eat and by taking drugs (called anti-emetics) to help relieve them. There are many anti-emetic drugs to choose from. You may need to try several before you get relief. Don't give up! Work with your health care team to find the drug or drugs that work best for you.

If you need help with nausea and vomiting or have cancer questions, please call us anytime, day or night, at **1-800-227-2345**.

Last Medical Review: 11/17/2015

Last Revised: 11/17/2015

2015 Copyright American Cancer Society

For additional assistance please contact your American Cancer Society
1-800-227-2345 or www.cancer.org