SYMPTOM

Feeling sick

Feeling sick, or nausea, is an unsettled stomach sensation that may come before vomiting.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
An unsettled stomach and urge to vomit

WHERE IT IS FELT
Upper belly and throat

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Stomach infections, pregnancy, motion sickness

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Unable to keep fluids down with signs of dehydration

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to days, based on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Recurring, worsening, or lasting more than a few days

Overview

Feeling sick is also called nausea. It is the sensation that you may vomit, although vomiting does not always happen.

Nausea is a symptom rather than a disease. It can be caused by a short-term stomach infection, pregnancy, travel, migraine, medicines, or many other conditions. Symptoms that occur alongside it often give useful clues about the cause.

Most brief episodes improve with rest and fluids. Medical advice is important if nausea keeps returning, prevents you from drinking, or occurs with other concerning symptoms.

What it may feel or look like

Nausea may feel like uneasiness, churning, or pressure in your upper belly or throat. You may feel as though food is sitting heavily in your stomach.

Other symptoms can include:

You may also have symptoms related to the cause, such as diarrhoea with a stomach infection, a headache with migraine, or a missed period with pregnancy.

- An urge to vomit
- Loss of appetite
- Increased saliva or frequent swallowing
- Sweating, dizziness, or looking pale
- Retching, which means trying to vomit without bringing anything up

Common causes

Common causes are usually temporary or manageable:

Less common causes include inner-ear disorders, gallbladder problems, stomach ulcers, liver or kidney illness, and side effects from longer-term medical conditions. Nausea alone cannot identify which cause applies to you.

- Stomach and bowel infections: These often cause vomiting, diarrhoea, cramps, or fever as well as nausea.
- Pregnancy: Nausea can occur at any time of day, especially during early pregnancy.
- Motion sickness: Car, boat, train, or air travel can disturb the balance system in the inner ear.
- Medicines and treatments: Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline , strong pain medicines, anaesthetics, and some other treatments can cause nausea.
- Indigestion or acid reflux: Stomach acid or food may move upward, causing burning, bloating, or an unpleasant taste.
- Migraine: Nausea may occur before or during a headache and can be made worse by light or sound.
- Stress or anxiety: The brain and digestive system affect each other, so strong emotions can cause real stomach symptoms.
- Alcohol or overeating: Large meals, rich foods, and alcohol can irritate or overfill the stomach.

When to seek medical care

Get same-day medical advice if you cannot keep fluids down or have signs of dehydration. These include a very dry mouth, dark urine, urinating much less than usual, unusual tiredness, or dizziness when standing.

Same-day advice is also appropriate if you are pregnant and cannot drink enough, or if you have diabetes and are vomiting or have high glucose or ketone readings.

Call emergency services if nausea or vomiting occurs with:

Book a routine appointment if nausea lasts more than a few days, repeatedly returns, disrupts eating, or causes unplanned weight loss. You should also arrange follow-up if it began after starting or changing a medicine. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without advice.

- Chest pressure or pain, shortness of breath, heavy sweating, or pain spreading to the arm, back, neck, or jaw
- Sudden severe abdominal pain or a hard, swollen abdomen
- Vomit containing blood, material like coffee grounds, or bright green fluid
- A sudden severe headache, confusion, a stiff neck, fainting, or new weakness
- Suspected poisoning or a recent serious head injury

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional may ask when the nausea started, whether you have vomited, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about pain, bowel changes, headaches, travel, alcohol, medicines, and possible pregnancy.

An examination may include checking your temperature, pulse, hydration, and abdomen. A pregnancy test, urine test, or blood tests may be useful in some situations. Scans or other tests are generally chosen according to your symptoms rather than being needed for every episode.

Keeping a brief record of meals, medicines, menstrual dates, headaches, and when nausea occurs may help if the symptom keeps returning.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. For mild nausea, try taking frequent small sips of water or another drink you tolerate. If you are losing fluid through vomiting or diarrhoea, a pharmacist can advise about an oral rehydration solution, which replaces water, salts, and sugar.

When you feel ready to eat, start with small amounts. Plain or cool foods may be easier to tolerate than large, fatty, spicy, or strongly scented meals. Fresh air and avoiding cooking smells may help. Stay upright after eating if reflux is a problem.

If movement triggers nausea, look toward a fixed point or the horizon and get fresh air where

possible. Planning breaks during travel may also help.

Anti-sickness medicines are available, but the right choice depends on the likely cause, your age, pregnancy, other conditions, and medicines you already take. Ask a pharmacist or clinician before using one. Do not take medicine prescribed for somebody else.

What to expect

Nausea from motion, rich food, or a brief stomach infection often settles once the trigger passes. Pregnancy-related nausea commonly improves later in pregnancy, although the timing differs between people.

Recovery can take longer if you have become dehydrated or the underlying cause continues. Symptoms that persist, worsen, or keep coming back should be assessed rather than repeatedly managed at home.

Common questions

Can I feel sick without vomiting?

Yes. Nausea and vomiting are separate symptoms. You may feel close to vomiting without actually doing so.

Could nausea mean I am pregnant?

It can be an early pregnancy symptom, but nausea alone cannot confirm pregnancy. Consider a home pregnancy test if pregnancy is possible and your period is late. Seek urgent help for a positive test with severe one-sided pain, heavy bleeding, shoulder pain, or fainting.

Can anxiety cause nausea?

Yes. Stress can change stomach movement and increase sensitivity in the digestive system. However, new or persistent nausea should not automatically be assumed to be anxiety.

Should I force myself to eat?

Usually not. Focus first on taking small sips of fluid. Eat small amounts when you feel able, choosing foods that you can tolerate.

Sources

- NHS: Feeling sick (nausea)

- MedlinePlus: Nausea and Vomiting
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: Symptoms and Causes of Viral Gastroenteritis
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: Morning Sickness-Nausea and Vomiting of Pregnancy
- Merck Manual Consumer Version: Nausea and Vomiting in Adults