SYMPTOM

Nausea and vomiting

Nausea is feeling sick to your stomach, while vomiting brings stomach contents up.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Feeling sick, sometimes followed by throwing up

WHERE IT IS FELT
Upper belly, throat, and mouth

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Stomach infections, food poisoning, medicines

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

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to days, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Vomiting beyond two days or nausea that keeps returning

Overview

Nausea is the uncomfortable feeling that you may vomit. Vomiting means forcefully bringing stomach contents up through your mouth. You can have nausea without vomiting, and vomiting may sometimes happen with little warning.

These symptoms are common and have many possible causes. Short-lived nausea and vomiting often come from a stomach infection, food poisoning, motion sickness, migraine, pregnancy, or a medicine. Less often, they may be related to a digestive blockage, inflammation, or another condition needing prompt care.

The main short-term concern is dehydration. This happens when your body loses more fluid and salts than you can replace.

What it may feel or look like

Nausea can feel like queasiness, churning, or discomfort in your upper belly or throat. You may become pale, sweaty, light-headed, or produce extra saliva. Food smells may make the feeling worse.

Before vomiting, you may gag or retch. Retching is the movement of vomiting without bringing anything up. Vomit may contain recently eaten food or clear, yellowish fluid after the stomach has emptied.

Other symptoms can help point toward a cause. Diarrhoea and cramps may occur with an infection or food poisoning. Headache and sensitivity to light can accompany migraine. Spinning or poor balance may suggest a problem affecting the inner ear.

Vomiting is different from reflux or regurgitation, in which food or sour fluid rises into the throat without forceful retching.

Common causes

Common causes include:

Do not stop a prescribed medicine without advice. A doctor or pharmacist can check whether nausea is a known side effect and whether another option is suitable.

Less common causes include gallstones, inflammation of the pancreas, liver or kidney problems, inner-ear disorders, and slow movement of food from the stomach. Repeated heavy cannabis use can cause cycles of severe nausea and vomiting in some people.

Urgent causes can include a blocked intestine, appendicitis, a serious infection, poisoning, or a problem affecting the brain. These are not the most likely explanations, but certain warning signs need prompt assessment.

- Viral stomach infections, often with diarrhoea or cramps
- Food poisoning after contaminated food or drink
- Medicines, including some antibiotics and strong pain medicines
- Pregnancy, especially during the first months
- Motion sickness, migraine, anxiety, or strong smells
- Indigestion, reflux, overeating, or drinking too much alcohol

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services or go to an emergency department if vomiting occurs with:

If poisoning is possible, contact your local poison service or emergency service. Do not make yourself vomit unless a poison specialist tells you to.

Seek same-day medical advice if you cannot keep fluids down or have signs of dehydration.

These include passing very little or dark urine, a dry mouth, marked dizziness, unusual sleepiness, or feeling faint when standing.

Prompt advice is also important if you are pregnant and cannot drink, are losing weight, or are passing much less urine. Babies, young children, older adults, and people with serious long-term conditions can become dehydrated more quickly.

Book a routine appointment if vomiting lasts beyond about two days, nausea continues for more than several days, or the problem keeps returning. Arrange review sooner if you are losing weight, having trouble swallowing, or think a medicine is responsible.

- Blood or material that looks like coffee grounds
- Green vomit, especially with severe pain or a swollen belly
- Severe or worsening chest or abdominal pain
- A sudden severe headache, stiff neck, confusion, or fainting
- Trouble breathing, severe weakness, or difficulty waking
- Repeated vomiting after a significant head injury
- Suspected poisoning or swallowing a harmful substance

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the symptoms began, how often you vomit, and whether you can keep fluids down. They may ask about pain, diarrhoea, headache, pregnancy, travel, recent meals, cannabis or alcohol use, and any medicines or supplements.

An examination may check your temperature, hydration, belly, balance, and nervous system. Many short-lived cases do not need tests.

Depending on your symptoms, testing may include blood or urine tests, a pregnancy test, or checks of kidney function and body salts. An ultrasound or other scan may be needed if there is severe pain, swelling, injury, or concern about a blockage. Ongoing symptoms sometimes require a camera test of the stomach, called an upper endoscopy.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and whether you are dehydrated. If you can drink, take frequent small sips rather than a large amount at once. Water may be enough for mild symptoms. An oral rehydration solution can replace fluid and salts lost through repeated

vomiting or diarrhoea.

When you feel ready to eat, start with small portions of foods you can tolerate. There is no need to force food. Avoid alcohol and meals that clearly make the nausea worse until you recover.

Rest in a quiet place and reduce strong smells. Fresh air and looking toward the horizon may help with motion sickness.

Anti-sickness medicines can help in some situations, but the best choice depends on the cause, your age, pregnancy, other conditions, and other medicines. Ask a pharmacist or doctor before using one. Some can cause drowsiness.

If you vomit after taking a prescribed medicine, do not automatically repeat the dose. Ask a pharmacist or the prescriber what to do.

Severe dehydration may require fluids through a vein. Other treatment may target the cause, such as migraine care or treatment for a digestive blockage.

What to expect

Vomiting from a brief stomach infection often improves within one or two days, although diarrhoea may continue longer. Food-related illness may settle within hours or several days. Migraine, pregnancy-related nausea, medicine side effects, and ongoing digestive problems can follow different patterns.

As you recover, you should gradually be able to drink, pass urine normally, and return to usual meals. Seek medical advice if improvement stops, symptoms return repeatedly, or new warning signs appear.

If an infection is likely, wash your hands carefully with soap and water. Avoid preparing food for others while you are vomiting and for a period after symptoms stop, according to local public health advice.

Common questions

Can I eat while feeling nauseated?

Yes, if you feel able. Try small portions and stop if eating makes the nausea worse. Keeping fluids down is more important in the short term.

Is yellow vomit always serious?

Yellow fluid is often bile, a digestive fluid that may appear after the stomach is empty.

Persistent bright green vomit, severe pain, or belly swelling needs urgent assessment.

Can stress cause nausea?

Yes. Stress and anxiety can affect the nerves and muscles involved in digestion. However, new or persistent nausea should not automatically be attributed to stress.

Is nausea during pregnancy normal?

It is common, but severe symptoms are not something you must simply endure. Seek prompt care if you cannot keep fluids down, pass very little urine, feel faint, or are losing weight.

Are nausea and vomiting contagious?

The symptoms themselves are not contagious. Some causes, such as viral stomach infections, can spread between people.

Sources

- MedlinePlus: Nausea and Vomiting , U.S. National Library of Medicine
- NIDDK: Symptoms and Causes of Viral Gastroenteritis , National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases
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- NHS: Dehydration , National Health Service
- ACOG: Morning Sickness-Nausea and Vomiting of Pregnancy , American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists