SYMPTOM

# Vomiting blood

Vomiting blood means bringing up red blood or dark, coffee-ground-like material from the upper digestive tract.

**WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**
Nausea followed by vomiting red or dark, grainy material

**WHERE IT IS FELT**
Upper belly and throat during vomiting

**MOST COMMON CAUSES**
Stomach irritation, peptic ulcers, tears after forceful retching

**WHEN IT IS URGENT**
Any red blood or coffee-ground vomit, even once

**USUALLY LASTS**
One episode or more, based on the cause

**SEE A DOCTOR IF**
Follow-up is recommended after urgent assessment or treatment

## Overview

Vomiting blood is called haematemesis . The blood usually comes from the upper digestive tract. This includes the oesophagus, which is the tube carrying food to your stomach, as well as the stomach and the first part of the small intestine.

The blood may be bright red, dark red, or brown-black like coffee grounds. Coffee-ground material is blood that has been partly changed by stomach acid.

Vomiting blood is not a diagnosis. It can have several causes, ranging from irritation after repeated vomiting to a bleeding ulcer. Even a small amount needs prompt medical assessment because you cannot judge the cause or amount of internal bleeding from its appearance alone.

## What it may feel or look like

You may feel sick before vomiting. Some people also have burning or pain in the upper belly, heartburn, difficulty swallowing, or pain after forceful retching.

The vomit may contain:

Blood swallowed during a heavy nosebleed, dental procedure, or mouth injury can later be vomited. Blood coughed up from the lungs is different: it is often frothy, mixed with mucus, and brought up during coughing rather than vomiting. It may still need urgent assessment.

Black, sticky, unusually strong-smelling bowel movements can be a sign that blood has passed through the digestive tract.

- Bright red blood, sometimes mixed with food
- Dark red or brown blood
- Black or brown grains that resemble wet coffee grounds
- Blood clots

## Common causes

Common causes include inflammation or damage to the lining of the stomach or oesophagus. Gastritis is inflammation of the stomach lining. Oesophagitis is inflammation of the food pipe, sometimes related to acid reflux.

A peptic ulcer is an open sore in the stomach or first part of the small intestine. Ulcers may be associated with infection by Helicobacter pylori bacteria or medicines such as aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, including ibuprofen and naproxen.

Forceful or repeated vomiting can cause a small tear where the oesophagus meets the stomach. This is called a Mallory-Weiss tear . It may happen after repeated retching, coughing, or vomiting.

Less common causes include abnormal blood vessels, blood-clotting problems, growths in the oesophagus or stomach, and injury from something swallowed.

Enlarged veins in the oesophagus or stomach, called varices , can also bleed. They are usually linked to serious liver disease and require emergency treatment.

The colour or amount of visible blood cannot reliably identify which cause is responsible.

## When to seek medical care

Get urgent medical help for any vomit containing blood or coffee-ground material, even if it happens only once. If the bleeding has stopped and you otherwise feel well, arrange urgent same-day assessment rather than waiting for a routine appointment.

Call emergency services now if:

Do not drive yourself if you feel faint or unwell. If possible, have someone stay with you. Avoid food and drink while waiting for emergency advice, unless a healthcare professional tells you otherwise.

Bring a list of your medicines, especially blood thinners like warfarin or apixaban , aspirin, and anti-inflammatory pain relievers. Do not stop a prescribed blood thinner without medical instructions unless emergency staff tell you to do so.

Routine follow-up is appropriate after the urgent problem has been assessed. This may be needed to review test results, check for anaemia, or make sure treatment is working.

- Bleeding is heavy, continuing, or happening repeatedly
- You feel faint, confused, very weak, or short of breath
- Your skin is pale, cold, or clammy
- You have severe or worsening belly or chest pain
- You have black, sticky bowel movements with weakness or dizziness
- You collapse or cannot stay awake

## How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask what the vomit looked like, how much there seemed to be, and whether you have pain, black stools, faintness, liver disease, ulcers, or recent forceful vomiting. They will also review alcohol use and medicines that can increase bleeding risk.

Checks may include your blood pressure, pulse, breathing, and abdomen. Blood tests can look for anaemia, blood-clotting problems, liver or kidney problems, and whether a blood transfusion might be needed.

An upper endoscopy is often used. A thin, flexible camera is passed through the mouth to examine the oesophagus, stomach, and first part of the small intestine. It can sometimes find and treat the bleeding during the same procedure. Imaging or a procedure to examine blood vessels may be needed if the source remains unclear.

## Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and how much blood has been lost. Initial care may include fluids through a vein, medicines to reduce stomach acid, oxygen, or a blood transfusion.

During an endoscopy, bleeding may be stopped with clips, heat, injected treatment, or bands

placed around enlarged veins. If endoscopy does not control the bleeding, treatment through a blood vessel or surgery may occasionally be required.

Longer-term treatment may include treating H. pylori , changing a medicine that contributed to irritation, managing liver disease, or taking prescribed acid-reducing medicine like omeprazole or lansoprazole .

There is no safe home treatment for vomiting blood. Do not try to make yourself vomit. Avoid taking extra aspirin, ibuprofen, or naproxen for pain while seeking advice, because these medicines can worsen digestive-tract bleeding.

## What to expect

Some causes settle after one treated episode, while others need ongoing care. Your recovery depends on where the bleeding came from, how much blood was lost, and whether an underlying condition needs treatment.

After discharge, you may need repeat blood tests, an endoscopy, or treatment for anaemia. Take prescribed medicines as directed and attend follow-up appointments. If blood appears again, seek urgent care rather than waiting for the next appointment.

## Common questions

Is coffee-ground vomit really blood?

It can be. Blood becomes dark and grainy after contact with stomach acid. It needs the same prompt assessment as bright red blood.

Can forceful vomiting cause a little blood?

Repeated retching can irritate the throat or cause a tear near the stomach. You cannot confirm this at home, so even a small streak should be assessed urgently.

Could red food look like blood?

Foods and drinks can sometimes colour vomit. If you are unsure whether it is blood, seek urgent medical advice rather than relying on colour alone.

Is vomiting blood the same as coughing blood?

No. Vomiting usually involves nausea and stomach contents. Coughing blood often produces frothy blood mixed with mucus. Both can require urgent care.

## Sources

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