

Patient education: Nausea and vomiting in adults (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What are nausea and vomiting? — Nausea is the feeling you get when you think you might throw up. Vomiting is when you actually throw up. These 2 symptoms can happen together. But sometimes people feel nauseous without throwing up, and some people throw up without feeling nauseous first.

What causes nausea and vomiting? — The most common causes include:

- **Food poisoning** – This can happen if you eat food that has gone bad. It is basically an infection in your stomach. Infections like these often also cause diarrhea. Other kinds of infections that affect the stomach or intestines can also cause nausea and vomiting.
- **Dizziness or motion sickness** – This can happen if you're on a boat or in a car, or something else that moves. It can also happen if there's something wrong inside your ears that affects your balance.
- **Medicines** – Lots of different medicines can cause nausea or vomiting. Some examples are antidepressants, antibiotics, vitamins, birth control pills, and pain medicines. People who are on chemotherapy for cancer treatment or who have been under anesthesia also often have nausea or vomiting.
- **Pregnancy** – Many women who are pregnant have nausea or vomiting. People sometimes call this "morning sickness," but it can happen at any time of day.
- **Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)** – GERD is condition that causes the juices that are in the stomach to leak back up into the esophagus, the tube that connects the throat to the stomach. It can sometimes cause nausea.
- **Problems with the stomach or intestines** – In some people, the stomach or intestines do not move food along the way that they are supposed to. In others, the intestines can get blocked. Both of these problems can cause nausea or vomiting.
- **Migraine headaches** – Some people who get migraine headaches have nausea during their headaches.
- **Alcohol** – Drinking too much alcohol can cause nausea and vomiting.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Call your doctor or nurse if your symptoms last longer than a day or 2, or you have severe symptoms. You should also call if you:

- Have chest or belly pain
- Throw up blood or something that looks like coffee grounds
- Have a bowel movement with blood, or a bowel movement that is black and looks like tar
- Have a fever higher than 101°F
- Have a severe headache or stiff neck

- Feel very tired or have trouble getting up
- Show signs of dehydration (meaning that your body has lost too much water). Signs of dehydration include:
 - Feeling very tired
 - Being very thirsty or having a dry mouth or tongue
 - Muscle cramps
 - Dizziness
 - Confusion
 - Urine that is dark yellow, or not needing to urinate for more than 5 hours

What can I do on my own to feel better? — You can:

- Drink lots of fluids, if possible
- Try eating, but start with foods that have a lot of fluid in them. Good examples are soup, Jell-O, and popsicles. If you do OK with those foods, you can try soft, bland foods, such as plain yogurt. Foods that are high in carbohydrates ("carbs"), like bread or saltine crackers, can help settle your stomach. Some people also find that ginger helps with nausea. You should avoid foods that have a lot of fat in them. They can make nausea worse. Call your doctor if your symptoms come back when you try to eat.
- Avoid strong smells, such as the smell of perfume
- Take medicines with meals, if possible. But check the bottle first, because some medicines must be taken on an empty stomach.

How are nausea and vomiting treated? — If you have been vomiting a lot for more than a day, your doctor or nurse will ask you lots of questions to try to find out what might be causing your symptoms. He or she might also:

- Give you fluids through a thin tube that goes in a vein, called an "IV"
- Give you medicines that control nausea and vomiting. Some examples include:
 - [Prochlorperazine](#) (brand name: Compro)
 - [Promethazine](#) (brand name: Phenergan)
 - [Metoclopramide](#) (brand name: Reglan)
 - [Ondansetron](#) (brand name: Zofran)
- Schedule tests for you to help find out why you have nausea or vomiting, such as a stomach X-ray

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