

Nausea and Vomiting

I feel so sick to my stomach!

Nausea is a feeling that you are going to vomit. Vomiting is the forceful elimination of the stomach's contents through the mouth. Retching occurs without vomiting and is also called "dry heaves."

Degrees of nausea and vomiting vary greatly depending on the type, dose and length of chemotherapy. Not everyone reacts in the same way. Despite great improvements in the effectiveness of anti-nausea medications, many patients still experience this unpleasant side effect.

Why does this happen?

Nausea and vomiting can start when a certain area of the brain is stimulated. Chemotherapy drugs cause the body to release chemicals that stimulate this area. Vomiting can be brought on by smell, taste, anxiety, pain, motion, certain images, or even thoughts. Nausea can also be triggered by changes in your stomach and intestines. Cells that line the stomach and intestines are affected by chemotherapy. When the lining is disrupted, these organs are more sensitive.

How are nausea and vomiting treated?

First of all, let your doctor or nurse know if you experience nausea and vomiting with your treatments. There are many anti-nausea (antiemetic) medications available to try. These medications work in different ways, so you may need to try more than one. Frequent vomiting can become a very serious problem if left untreated.

Call your doctor if you experience any of the following:

- If you choke while vomiting or if you can't stop coughing after you vomit
- If you have blood or material that looks like coffee grounds in your vomit
- If you can't drink more than four cups of liquid a day or eat for more than two days
- If you can't take your medications
- If you feel weak or dizzy

How can I deal with nausea and vomiting?

Besides taking anti-nausea medication, some simple lifestyle changes can help relieve nausea and vomiting. Remember, it is not necessary to force yourself to eat or drink when you are nauseated. Take your medication as prescribed and wait for the nausea to pass before trying to eat or drink.

- Drink plenty of fluids until about two hours before your chemotherapy treatment. You will feel stronger and your body will be able to eliminate waste products more quickly.
- When you are nauseated, try bland foods such as toast and crackers. Stay away from spicy foods. Foods that leave an aftertaste may make you feel nauseated later (onions, garlic, etc.).
- Do not lie flat on your back when nauseated; try sitting up or lie back just a little.
- Eat frequent, small meals and snacks.
- Try popsicles or gelatin, or sip cold clear liquids slowly.
- Eat foods with pleasant aromas.
- Try ice chips or frozen juice chips.
- Eat food cold or at room temperature to decrease smell and taste.
- Try to rest quietly for at least an hour after each meal; distract yourself with soft music, a favorite television program or company.
- Try to lower your anxiety level during your treatment. Bring a book, listen to music, or bring a friend to help you stay calm. Try to remain quiet and relaxed as much as possible.
- Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothes.
- If you vomit in bed, lie on your side so the vomit will not be inhaled or swallowed.
- If you know you get nauseated at a certain time each day or in anticipation of an event, go ahead and take anti-nausea medication as prescribed before you actually feel nauseated.
- If you are not taking anti-nausea medication around the clock, take it first thing in the morning, before you get out of bed.
- Rinse your mouth and brush your teeth before and after eating to avoid any lingering tastes that may trigger nausea.

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Nausea and vomiting medications

Here is a reference list to use and discuss with your healthcare team if you are experiencing nausea and vomiting and one of these medicines has been prescribed for you. The type of anti-nausea medicine you receive is dependent upon the type of chemotherapy you receive. The shortacting medication prescribed will usually be promethazine or prochlorperazine. Prochlorperazine comes in tablet, capsule, suppository or injectable forms. The tablet can be taken every 4-6 hours, while the capsule is usually taken every 12 hours. The suppository can be used rectally every 4-6 hours. The injectable forms are generally used in the clinic setting.

The long-acting medicines are as follows:

1. **Anzemet® (Dolasetron Mesylate)**

Take one tablet by mouth daily starting the day after chemotherapy for three days. It is best to take the tablet in the morning unless otherwise directed.

2. **Zofran® (Ondansetron HCl)**

Take one tablet every 8-12 hours (two to three times daily) as needed for nausea and vomiting beginning the day after your chemotherapy unless otherwise directed.

3. **Kytril® (Granisetron HCl)**

Take one tablet every 12 hours (twice daily) as needed for nausea and vomiting beginning the day after your chemotherapy unless otherwise directed.

4. **Emend® (Aprepitant)**

Tablets come in a tri-pack (3 tablets total). The first tablet should be taken on day 1, one hour prior to your chemotherapy. Then take one tablet on day 2 (day after your treatment) and one on day 3.

- If you experience breakthrough nausea after taking the long-acting medication, the promethazine or prochlorperazine can be used as indicated above unless otherwise directed.
- If you continue to experience symptoms after using the medication prescribed, please contact your physician.

What can my friends and family do to help?

It is difficult for caregivers to watch someone they care about feel nauseated and sick. Nausea that is caused by chemotherapy usually lasts a few days after the treatment and then will slowly subside. This is a difficult period of time for everyone. Sometimes it is easy to become anxious and worried. Caregivers can help with chores around the house to allow you more time to rest and relax.

- A caregiver should never try to force someone who is nauseated to eat. Wait until the nausea has passed before offering food or drink.
- Sometimes patients wait before taking anti-nausea medication. Instead, they should be encouraged to take their medication when they first experience nausea.
- Try not to serve meals with strong aromas, such as fish or cabbage.
- Encourage patients to eat a balanced diet and to avoid foods that take up room in the stomach but offer no nutritional value, such as tea, coffee and desserts. For more information see the nutritional information found in the Wellness section.

FYI...

To find out more about nausea and vomiting check out these websites:

www.nccn.org

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network has information on nausea and vomiting. Go to the "Patient Guidelines" and then to "Nausea and Vomiting."

www.cancer.org

The American Cancer Society has additional information about nausea and vomiting. Go to "Managing Your Side Effects" section.

www.nci.nih.gov

The National Cancer Institute website has information on treatment side effects. Go to "Cancer Information," then "Coping with Cancer" and then "Nausea and Vomiting" under "Other Complications and Side Effects."