

Nausea and Vomiting

What are nausea and vomiting?

Nausea and vomiting are common side effects of many cancer treatments. Nausea is feeling like you are going to vomit or throw up. Vomiting is when the contents of your stomach are expelled through the esophagus (the tube through which food passes from the throat to the stomach) and out of your mouth. Nausea and vomiting may happen before treatment, within 24 hours after treatment, or 2 or more days after treatment. Retching, also called dry heaving, is when you try to vomit but nothing comes up.



What causes nausea and vomiting?

Many types of chemotherapy can cause mild to severe nausea and vomiting. Chemotherapy may increase your risk of having nausea and vomiting if you have vomited after cancer treatment before, you often have motion sickness, you are anxious before cancer treatment, or you are younger than 50, especially if you are a woman. Radiation therapy, especially to the brain, spinal cord, abdomen, and pelvis, may also cause nausea and vomiting. People who receive total body radiation therapy have the highest risk. Other causes may include cancer that has spread to the brain; blocked intestine, also called gastrointestinal obstruction; electrolyte imbalance, which is the loss of minerals such as potassium and sodium; infections or bleeding in the stomach and intestines; heart disease; and other medications.

What are the risks of nausea and vomiting?

Mild nausea and vomiting can be uncomfortable. Usually it does not cause serious problems. Vomiting a lot and often is a problem. It can cause dehydration, electrolyte imbalance, weight loss, and depression. Severe vomiting can reopen surgical wounds, create tears in the esophagus, or break bones. This may lead some people to stop cancer treatment.

How are nausea and vomiting prevented and treated?

Vomiting can be prevented with medications for most patients who are receiving cancer treatment. However, patients may still have nausea even if they are not vomiting. Medications to prevent vomiting should be taken as prescribed, even after treatment, because the risk of vomiting can continue for several days after treatment. If you have nausea and vomiting even if you are taking your medication as prescribed, tell your doctor. Your doctor can recommend other medications. Behavioral treatments, such as distraction, relaxation, positive imagery, and acupuncture, may help. Some herbal medications, like ginger, may help with nausea. However, you should discuss your plans with your doctor before starting any behavioral treatments or herbal supplements. Learn more about managing nausea and vomiting at www.cancer.net/recommendations.

What if nausea and vomiting don't stop or get worse?

If your nausea and vomiting does not stop or gets worse, talk with your doctor. The cause may need to be identified. Also, if vomiting leads to dehydration, you will need to be treated for that. If you cannot keep food or water in your body because of severe nausea and vomiting, it can lead to serious dehydration and electrolyte imbalance. Dehydration can lead to other health problems. It is important to talk to your doctor if your symptoms get worse throughout treatment.

ASCO ANSWERS is a collection of oncologist-approved patient education materials developed by the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) for people with cancer and their caregivers.

Questions to ask the doctor

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your health care team:

- Does my treatment carry a high risk of nausea and vomiting?
- What can be done to manage nausea?
- What can be done to prevent vomiting?
- Are some medications preferred over others? Why?
- What are the instructions for taking these medications?
- What are the side effects of these medications?
- What are the costs of these medications?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs of these medications, who can help me with these concerns?
- Are there options that can help me manage nausea and vomiting that don't involve medications?
- Whom do I call with questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional information on nausea, vomiting, and other side effects can be found at www.cancer.net/sideeffects.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Acute nausea or vomiting:
Occurs within 24 hours after starting treatment

Antiemetics:
Drugs that prevent nausea or vomiting

Anticipatory nausea or vomiting:
Occurs before treatment

Chemotherapy:
The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Complementary medicine:
Therapies used in addition to conventional, widely used therapies

Chronic nausea or vomiting:
Occurs regularly over a long time, typically in patients with advanced cancer

Dehydration:
The loss of too much water from the body

Delayed nausea or vomiting:
Occurs more than 24 hours after starting treatment

Emesis:
Vomiting or throwing up

Intravenous chemotherapy:
Chemotherapy injected into a vein

Palliative care:
The relief of side effects, also called symptom management or supportive care

Radiation therapy:
The use of high-energy x-rays or other particles to destroy cancer cells

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