

The best way to control nausea and vomiting is to stop them before they start. The good news is that both symptoms can almost always be lessened by changing the way you eat and by taking drugs (called anti-emetics) to help relieve symptoms. There are many anti-emetic drugs to choose from today. You may need to try several before you get relief. Don't give up! Work with your health care team to find the one that works best for you.

For more information, please visit www.cancer.org.

Nausea and Vomiting

Many patients getting chemotherapy (often called "chemo") worry about nausea and vomiting more than any other side effect. How often you feel these side effects and how severe they might be depends on the drugs you are getting and how they affect you. New drugs help prevent or treat these side effects, making them less common than in the past. Still, these are side effects that sometimes happen with chemo.



Creation of this material was made possible in part by a pioneering grant from CBCC-USA.

Nausea is having a sick feeling in the stomach or a wave-like feeling in the stomach and the back of the throat. Nausea can also make you sweat, feel dizzy or weak, and have more saliva in your mouth than usual. It can happen even when you are not thinking about food. It can lead to retching, vomiting, or both.

Retching is a rhythmic movement of the diaphragm (the breathing muscle that separates the chest and abdomen) and stomach muscles.

Vomiting is throwing up. This process causes the contents of the stomach to be forced out through the mouth. Vomiting can be acute, which means it starts within minutes to hours after you get chemo. Or it can be delayed, starting or lasting for 24 hours after chemo and sometimes going on for days. You can vomit even if you have not eaten anything and are not feeling sick to your stomach.

Anticipatory vomiting is when just thinking about treatment causes you to throw up. Sights, sounds, and odors can also trigger this type of vomiting. Often, just seeing the treatment room can make it happen.

What you can do for a sick stomach:

- Try eating something dry, such as toast or crackers, before getting up if a sick stomach is a problem in the morning. (Don't try this if you have dry mouth or problems with mouth or throat sores.)
- Eat small, frequent meals. Have a snack before bedtime.
- Drink clear liquids served cold and sipped slowly. (Clear liquids are those you can see through, like rehydrating solutions, coconut water, lime juice, etc.)
- Stick with foods you like. Many people going through cancer treatment find that red meat and meat broths taste bad. Try other protein sources, such as fish, chicken, and peanut butter.
- Suck on hard candy with pleasant smells, such as lemon drops or mints. This can help get rid of bad tastes.
- Eat food cold or at room temperature to decrease its smell and taste. Avoid fatty, fried, spicy, or very sweet foods.
- Try to rest quietly for at least an hour after each meal. Rest in a chair, but don't lie flat for at least 2 hours after you've finished eating.
- Distract yourself with soft music, a favorite TV program, or a visit from a family member or friend.
- Relax and take slow, deep breaths if you feel sick to your stomach.
- Be sure your doctor knows about your sick stomach because there are medicines that can help. Be sure to take your medicine at the early signs of nausea because this may keep you from starting to vomit.
- Ask about medicines or other ways to help with this problem if you feel sick to your stomach just before doctor visits.

What you can do if you are throwing up:

- Lie on your side if you are in bed so you will not inhale or swallow vomit.
- Ask that drugs be prescribed in suppository form if possible.
- Get your liquids in a form that can be taken in slowly, such as ice chips or frozen juice chips.
- Start taking in 1 teaspoon of cool liquid every 10 minutes after you stop throwing up. Slowly increase it to 1 tablespoon every half hour. If you are able to keep that down after an hour or so, try larger amounts.

What the person caring for you can do:

- Cook meals for the patient when he or she is feeling sick, or ask others to help with this. Use kitchen vent fans to keep food smells away from the patient.
- Cover or remove foods with strong or unpleasant smells.
- Try using plastic forks and spoons; metal ones may cause a bitter taste.
- Weigh the patient at the same time each day if he or she has been throwing up. Fast weight loss may be a sign that fluid loss (dehydration) is getting severe.
- Talk to the doctor about medicines to help prevent vomiting.
- Watch the patient for dizziness, weakness, or confusion.
- Try to help the patient avoid constipation and dehydration. Either of these can make nausea worse.

Call the doctor if the patient:

- Might have inhaled some of the vomited material
- Vomits more than 3 times an hour for 3 or more hours
- Vomits blood or something that looks like coffee grounds
- Cannot take in more than 4 cups of liquid or ice chips in a day
- Cannot eat for more than 2 days
- Cannot take his or her medicines
- Becomes weak, dizzy, or confused
- Loses 2 or more pounds in 1 to 2 days (a sign he or she is losing too much water)
- Has dark yellow urine and doesn't urinate as often as usual