



Nausea and Vomiting

Nausea and vomiting are some of the most distressing symptoms experienced by patients with advanced illness and they take a toll on both the patient's physical and emotional wellbeing.

What are nausea and vomiting?

Nausea refers to the queasy feeling in your throat or your stomach. Vomiting is when you actually get rid of the contents of your stomach through your mouth. Sometimes the combination of nausea and vomiting is called emesis.

Common causes of nausea and vomiting

What causes nausea and vomiting, or emesis? Lots of things cause emesis, including food that is hard to digest, some medications, anaesthesia or an illness such as a virus. It can also be caused by chemotherapy or radiation therapy. Nausea and vomiting may be caused by any one or all of the following -

- Some bowel problems including constipation
- Liver problems
- Infections
- Food sensitivity
- Radiotherapy
- Chemotherapy
- Some medications, e.g. antibiotics, morphine, iron, ARV drugs
- Raised pressure in the brain
- Anxiety
- Pain
- Kidney failure

Managing your nausea and vomiting

Your hospice doctor and sister will, as far as possible, investigate and treat the underlying cause of your nausea. It is important to communicate with the hospice team as any nausea or vomiting may indicate a complication of illness or side effect of a drug. Hospice uses many different drug kinds of nausea medications to reduce nausea. Medications for nausea can be taken in the following ways.

- Orally if you are able to swallow or keep medicines down
- Rectally in the form of a suppository
- Sublingual tablets (dissolve under the tongue)



- Subcutaneous (under the skin) injections
- Intra-muscular injections (rarely necessary)
- Intra-venous injections (rarely necessary)
- In the palliative care setting it is not uncommon for the hospice doctor to prescribe more than one anti-nausea medication at one time. Sometimes several different medications need to be used in combination for effective relief of nausea.

Use of the syringe driver in the management of nausea and vomiting

Where the nausea and vomiting persist or is severe, a syringe driver might be necessary. A syringe driver is a small battery operated machine that drives a syringe containing anti-nausea medication. This is given as a continuous subcutaneous infusion (a small needle inserted just under the skin).

What about dehydration?

Some patients who are nauseous become dehydrated. It is not usually necessary to automatically start intravenous rehydration. Oral rehydration is safe and effective and can be done at home. Once the nausea settles on medication, the patient will be able to start sipping fluids again.

In those patients who are not able to be rehydrated orally, the subcutaneous route is preferred in the palliative care setting as it is very safe and can be done at home.

It is important to note that **too much** fluid can also cause problems in hospice patients, such as increased swelling, oedema and excessive rattling in the chest. The hospice sister or doctor will assess how much fluid is required and which route is most appropriate.

Is nausea and vomiting serious?

It may not seem as important as the illness you are battling, but do not underestimate nausea and vomiting—they can be very serious. Call your hospice sister if nausea and vomiting lasts more than 24 hours, if you are confused, if you are not urinating very often or if you have a dry mouth or sunken eyes. These can be signs of severe dehydration.

Besides the physical effects, nausea and vomiting can also be emotionally upsetting. Emesis can make you anxious or depressed and interrupt your daily routine. This is why it is so important to take nausea and vomiting seriously.

While you have the problem of nausea and vomiting you may not feel like eating normally. The following dietary advice might be helpful.

Foods

- Stick with what you can eat. Do not force yourself to eat foods that make you queasy



or uncomfortable.

- Avoid greasy, fried foods or rich sauces, as they can be difficult to digest. Eat bland foods rather such as toast, crackers, cereals and light soup.
- Try eating some dry food such as toast or crackers first thing in the morning before you get up.
- If you have been vomiting, eat savoury foods rather than very sweet ones, e.g. chicken soup or weak Bovril.
- Have cold foods in preference to hot as these emit less odour.
Try ginger biscuits and ginger drinks, e.g. ginger ale.

Avoid strong odours

- If the smell of cooking makes you feel sick, try to eat meals from the freezer that only need minimal preparation and heating up. It is helpful to have your bedroom as far away from the kitchen as possible to minimise the smell of cooking.
- Stay away from heady perfumes, sprays, smoke or anything with an annoying smell.

Fluids

Drink little and often throughout the day to make sure you are having enough fluid.

Try—

- Tea, lemon tea, iced tea.
- Diluted fruit juices and squashes.
- Fizzy drinks, e.g. soda water, Sprite, Crème Soda, Lucozade, mineral water or ginger ale.
- Lemon drinks, e.g. fresh or concentrated lemon juice in water or soda water.
- Skimmed milk or 2% low fat milk might be easier to digest than full cream milk.
- Flavoured milks, e.g. chilled Nesquik or milk shakes could be used instead of plain milk.
- If some drinks taste too sweet, serve them chilled with ice and/or add a few drops of lemon juice.

Be comfortable

- Wear loose fitting clothes with elastic or drawstring waistbands.
- Watch temperatures. Keep your environment comfortable. You do not want to shiver or sweat if you are nauseated.

Relax

- Relax as much as possible. Being anxious increases nausea. Meditate, listen to music, read or soak in a warm bath. Do anything that makes you more relaxed and at ease.
- Take slow deep breaths if you become nauseous.
- Open a window to allow fresh air in.



When nausea and vomiting have improved

- Be sure to eat little and often—every 2-3 hours—to replace lost nutrients and to build up your strength.
- If nausea and vomiting do not recur, gradually introduce small portions of your favourite foods, building up, when able, to a more substantial diet.
- Try not to eat greasy foods and rich sauces as they are often difficult to digest. Some foods that are easier to digest are:-
 - Biscuits
 - Breakfast cereals
 - Ice cream
 - Milk puddings
 - Tinned or stewed fruit
 - Jellies
 - Yoghurt
- If nausea and vomiting persist, speak to your hospice sister or doctor for further advice and support.

The importance of regular bowel movements

Even if you are not eating or drinking much, it is essential to still have regular bowel movements. Constipation aggravates and even causes nausea. It may be necessary for you to take a daily dose of a laxative.