

# Managing Your Nausea and Vomiting

Symptom Management



**This patient guide will help you understand:**

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This guide is for people who have cancer-related nausea and vomiting before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients and the patient’s family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

## A What is nausea and vomiting?

**Nausea** is an unpleasant feeling in the back of your throat and stomach. It can make you:

- have more saliva (spit)
- have clammy skin
- have a fast heart rate or make you feel light-headed
- feel sick to your stomach
- feel queasy
- feel like you have "butterflies" in your stomach

**Vomiting** is "throwing-up" the stomach contents through the mouth. Vomiting may or may not happen with nausea. When your stomach is empty you may have retching or "dry heaves".

Nausea and vomiting are serious symptoms of cancer treatment that may have a big impact on your life. It is important to get help as soon as possible.

## B What causes nausea and vomiting?

Many different things can cause you to feel nauseated or to vomit, including:

- cancer or cancer treatments
- pain
- anxiety
- history of nausea and vomiting
- infection
- medications
- constipation
- headaches
- motion sickness
- other medical problems

C

## What can I do to manage my nausea and vomiting?

### 1) Take your anti-nausea medications

It's easier to prevent nausea with medications than it is to treat it once it starts.

Take your medication as your health care team prescribed. There are 2 types of anti-nausea medications:

1. Some medications are taken at regular, set times to prevent and control nausea.
2. Other medications may be taken as you need them if you feel nauseous in between your regular medications. These are called PRNs. Taking too much can cause side effects.

#### Remember:

- No medication can control nausea and vomiting all of the time.
- Most anti-nausea medications take 20 to 60 minutes before they start to work.



#### Be safe!

- Do not use more of the as-needed medication than allowed in a day.
- Talk to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse about when and how to take your anti-nausea medications.

## What should I do if I vomit?

Stop eating and drinking for 30-60 minutes. Then try reintroducing drinks and food in this order:

1. Clear liquids (like water, ice chips, watered-down juice, broth, gelatin, popsicles)
2. Dry starchy food (like crackers or dry toast)
3. Protein-rich foods (like chicken, fish or eggs)
4. Dairy foods (like yogurt, milk or cheese)

If you vomit in between your regular anti-nausea medication doses, take your “as-needed” medication. Wait 30-60 minutes. Then try drinking liquids and continue with steps 2 to 4.

To keep your mouth clean, rinse with a bland rinse after vomiting.

**Tip!**

### Homemade mouth rinse:

Mix together:

- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 4 cups water

## If you have severe nausea and vomiting:

Anti-nausea medications will often be prescribed on a regular schedule.

“As-needed” medications may be taken as well as your regularly scheduled nausea medication.

If you are not able to keep pills down, speak to your health care team about other ways to take them (like using dissolving tablets, suppositories or injections).

Drink small amounts of liquids.

If you are not able to drink, you may need to get liquids through an IV to keep you hydrated.



**Patient story:**

I was given so many medications at the beginning of treatment that I was confused about what each was for. Ask the pharmacist to mark which bottle contains the pills to take when you start to feel nauseous. Then you will be able to find the bottle quickly when you need to take it.



## 2) Make Lifestyle Changes



Wear loose clothing. Clothing that is tight around your waist can make nausea worse.



Relax and take your time while you eat. Eating too quickly can make nausea worse.



Sit for 30-60 minutes after eating. Lying down right after a meal can cause nausea.



Rinse your mouth with a bland rinse (see [page 3](#)) before you eat to keep it clean and moist.



Brush your teeth 30 minutes after you eat and before bed (at least 4 times a day). This helps to get rid of tastes in your mouth that make you feel sick.



Suck on hard candies or lemon drops to get rid of bad tastes in your mouth.



Change your position when you start to feel sick.



Plan work or activities for the times of day when you usually feel better.

### 3) Drink and Eat Well

#### Drinking



- Sip small amounts of liquids often during the day. As your nausea starts to get better, add different drinks and foods, slowly increasing the amounts.
- Drink at least 6 - 8 cups of liquids per day unless you've been told to drink less.
- Drink cool liquids. They may be easier to drink than hot or very cold liquids.
- Drink liquids and eat foods separately — at least 30 minutes apart.

#### What should I drink to help my nausea and vomiting?

- Water, watered-down juice or sports drinks, flat gingerale, lemonade, broths and non-creamy soups
- Drink liquids, even when you do not feel thirsty. It is important to stay hydrated
- Suck on ice chips,  popsicles or frozen fruit

#### What drinks should I limit?

- Caffeine, including coffee and caffeinated soft drinks (cola)
- Alcohol
- If you are on oxaliplatin or any drug that increases your sensitivity to cold, skip this suggestion. Avoid frozen foods (ice, popsicles or frozen fruit)

Some patients say that ginger or peppermint make them feel better. Check with your health care team before you take these or any other natural health products.

## Eating



If you are nauseated or vomiting:

**First try foods that are dry, starchy or bland, like:**

- Crackers, pretzels, dry toast or cereal
- Boiled potatoes, noodles, gelatin (like Jello®), rice



**If you feel better, add more food, like:**

- Light broth soups
- Broiled, boiled or baked lean meat, poultry and fish
- Skim or 1% milk, low fat yogurt, cheese
- Fresh, frozen or canned fruit and vegetables

### What foods should I limit?

- Fatty, fried meats and eggs  
(reintroduce eggs see page 3)
- Gravy, rich sauces, cream, sour cream
- Onion, garlic
- Doughnuts, pastries, sweet desserts
- Very spicy foods

## Tips for Eating:

Eat small amounts every 2-3 hours. Many small meals can be easier to eat than 3 larger meals.

Hunger can make feelings of nausea stronger.

### If the smell of food or drinks bothers you:

- Drink liquids through a straw to avoid their smell.
- Eat cold or room temperature foods. They do not smell as strong as hot foods.
- Open a window or use a fan to get rid of food smells in the room.
- If possible, stay out of the kitchen. Ask someone else to prepare meals. Buy prepared meals.
- Get some fresh air. It may reduce nausea.

Ask your health care team to refer you to a registered dietitian. A dietitian can help you find ways to eat and drink well when symptoms make it a challenge.

## 4) Learn to Relax

Relaxation exercises can help you feel more in control of your mind and your body when you get nauseous.

### These activities can help you relax:

- Progressive muscle relaxation (to learn more go to [www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com) and search progressive muscle relaxation)
- Deep breathing exercises

- Take a walk outside or breathe fresh air through an open window
- Watch TV or a movie
- Listen to music

## 5) Consider Complementary Therapies

There is no good evidence to show that complementary therapies can treat nausea and vomiting, but they may help with anxiety, which can cause nausea. To reduce your anxiety, you may want to try:

- Acupuncture
- Acupressure
- Guided imagery
- Hypnosis
- Distraction techniques
- Visualization
- Music therapy
- Biofeedback (training your body to do things, like slow your heart rate)

To learn about complementary treatments and relaxation exercises, talk to:

- Counsellors with a background in psychosocial care, anxiety reduction or social work
- Spiritual care providers
- Primary care providers

## 6) Find Support

You don't have to cope with your nausea and vomiting alone. You can find support in your community and through your health care team.

### These tips can help you find support:

- Ask family or friends to help you with things like housework, shopping, and child or pet care.
- Talk with someone you trust about how you are feeling.
- Join a support group. There are cancer support groups online or your health care team can help you find one in your community.
- Take care of your spiritual needs through nature, religion or activities that bring you peace of mind like writing in a journal.

**D**

### When should I talk to my health care team?

Tell your health care team right away if you:

- Are not able to keep any water, food or pills in your stomach
- Have severe nausea that lasts more than 24 hours
- Are weak, dizzy and confused



If you have any symptoms that are not normal for you, please let your health care team know.

Your questions and concerns are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

**Find this and other Alberta cancer care resources  
at your cancer centre and online:**

[www.cancercontrolalberta.ca](http://www.cancercontrolalberta.ca)



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This book is meant to support the information your health care team gives you. It does not replace any information that your health care team gives you.

The information is to be updated every 3 years, or as new clinical evidence emerges. If there are any concerns or updates with this information, please email [cancerpatienteducation@ahs.ca](mailto:cancerpatienteducation@ahs.ca).

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