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# How to Manage Your Nausea and Vomiting



## 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.

# What is nausea and vomiting?

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**Nausea** is an unpleasant feeling in the back of your throat and stomach.

It can make you have more saliva (spit), clammy skin, a fast heart rate or feel light-headed.

**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 can have a big impact on your life. It is important to get help as soon as possible.

## **Nausea can make you feel:**

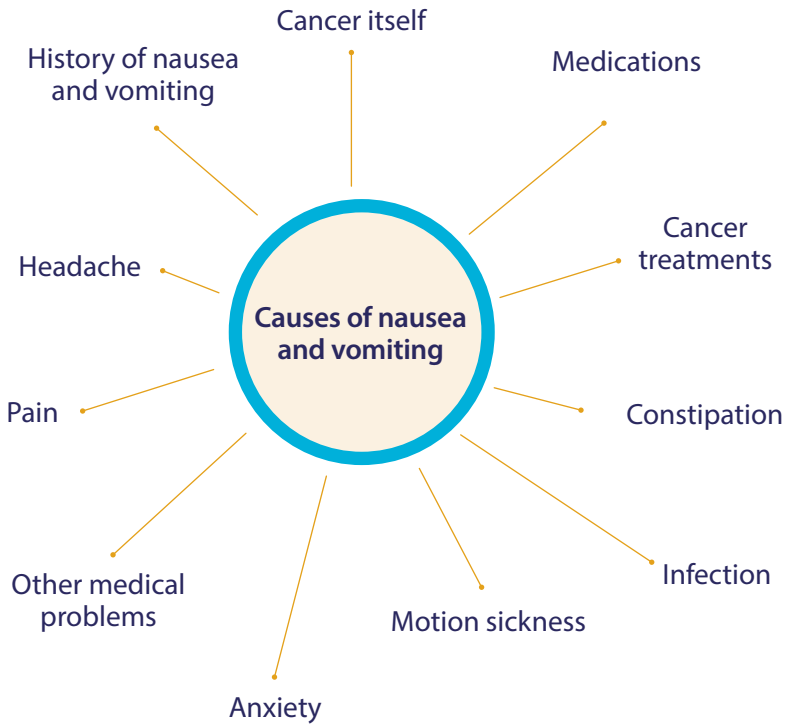
- Sick to your stomach
- Queasy
- Like you have ‘butterflies’ in your stomach



# What causes nausea and vomiting?

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This picture shows things that can cause nausea and vomiting:



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

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## Take Anti-Nausea Medications

It is 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 two 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. Taking too much can cause side effects.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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."

### What should I do if I vomit?

Stop eating and drinking for 30-60 minutes. Then start eating and drinking slowly 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.

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

#### Homemade mouth rinse

Mix together:

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

## If you have severe nausea and vomiting

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

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

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Drink small amounts of liquids.

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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).

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

## Make Lifestyle Changes



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

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

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

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Rinse your mouth with a bland rinse (p.5) before eating to keep it clean and moist.

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

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

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Change your position when you start to feel sick.

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

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## 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 cold liquids.

Drink liquids and eat foods separately, at least 30 minutes apart.

### 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.

You can also visit **EatRightOntario.ca** or call **1-877-510-5102** to speak to a registered dietitian for free.

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

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

### What drinks should I limit?

- ✔ Caffeine, including coffee and caffeinated soft drinks (cola)
- ✔ Alcohol

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



## What should I eat to help my nausea and 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
- Gravy, rich sauces, cream, sour cream
- Onion, garlic
- Doughnuts, pastries, sweet desserts
- Very spicy foods

## 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.





## Use Complementary Therapies



### These therapies may help you feel better:

Acupuncture

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Acupressure

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Guided imagery

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Hypnosis

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Distraction techniques

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Visualization

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Music therapy

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Biofeedback (training your body to do things, like slow your heart rate)

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For more information on these strategies see the Canadian Cancer Society's guide on Complementary Therapies. Go to [www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

## 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

### 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

## 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.

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Talk with someone you trust about how you are feeling.

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Join a support group. There are cancer support groups online or your health care team can help you find one in your community.

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Take care of your spiritual needs through nature, religion or activities that bring you peace of mind like writing in a journal.

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**To learn more about online support groups,** check out Canadian Cancer Society's Peer Support Service. Go to **[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)**

# When should I talk to my health care team?

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## **Tell your health care team right away if you have these symptoms:**

You are not able to keep any water, food or pills in your stomach

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Severe nausea that lasts for more than 24 hours

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You are weak, dizzy and confused

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## **What is symptom screening?**

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

Use the boxes below to help your health care team understand your symptom.



0 is no nausea and vomiting and 10 is the worst possible nausea and vomiting.

**1-3**

You may have **Mild** nausea and vomiting if:

It goes away after it is treated

You do not feel thirsty

You are not as hungry but you are still able to eat

**4-6**

You may have **Moderate** nausea and vomiting if:

It does not go away within 6 hours after treatment

You feel thirsty or have a dry mouth

You are unable to eat or drink for 24 hours

**7-10**

You may have **Severe** nausea and vomiting if:

You are not able to keep any water, food or pills in your stomach.

There is blood or what looks like 'coffee grounds' in your vomit

You have severe stomach pain or headache

You lose weight

You are weak, dizzy, confused or very drowsy

Your health care team wants to know about your nausea and vomiting. Your questions and concerns are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

# Where can I get more information?

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For links to these and other helpful resources please go to [www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

### **Cancer Care Ontario**

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### **Canadian Cancer Society**

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

### **Nourish**

<http://www.nourishonline.ca>

## Support Services:

### **Canadian Cancer Society Community Services Locator**

[www.cancer.ca/csl](http://www.cancer.ca/csl)

### **Canadian Cancer Society Peer Support Service**

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### **Cancer Chat Canada**

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

## Book:

### **Goes Down Easy:**

**Recipes to help you cope with the challenge of eating during cancer treatment —**

Elise Mecklinger, 2006.

## Booklets:

### **Call the Canadian Cancer Society**

to be mailed a copy of the two booklets below

1-888-939-3333

### **Complementary therapies:**

**A guide for people with cancer**

**Eating well when you have cancer**

**Ask your health care team for more information about managing your nausea and vomiting:**

Self-management classes:

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Local support groups:

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Videos:

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Books:

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Pamphlets:

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**Ask your health care team who to contact if your symptoms are so bad that you need help right away.**

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The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Eating Tips for Dealing with Nausea (University Health Network)
- Nausea and Vomiting (Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre)
- Ideas to help manage nausea (North York General)
- Nausea and Vomiting (London Health Sciences Centre)
- Tips to help you manage your symptoms: Nausea and Vomiting (The Ottawa Hospital)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about nausea and vomiting. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing nausea and vomiting. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

Need this information in an accessible format?

1-855-460-2647 | TTY (416) 217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient symptom management guides please go to:

**[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)**

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Was this patient guide helpful? Let us know at:

**<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/patientguidefeedback>**

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