

# Nausea and vomiting

## DEFINITION

Nausea is characterized by a feeling of discomfort followed by a need to vomit or by vomiting. Vomiting consists in expelling the contents of the stomach orally.

## WHAT CAUSES IT?

Several medications can cause nausea or vomiting, including HIV drugs.

Most of the antiretroviral drugs can cause nausea, specifically zidovudine (Retrovir®, Combivir®, Trizivir™) and the class of viral protease inhibitors. If the medication is the culprit, nausea will usually appear shortly after the first doses of the medication are taken.

A viral or bacterial infection can also cause nausea and vomiting.

It's important to identify the cause so that the symptoms can be properly treated.

## WHY TALK ABOUT IT?

To correctly identify the cause.

Because nausea, and more particularly vomiting, affect your quality of life, which may decrease treatment adherence.

Because nausea can prevent you from eating properly, and could lead to fatigue and weight loss.

Because vomiting may result in substantial loss of water, minerals and can lead to dehydration.

Vomiting may also decrease the absorption of your medication and as a result reduce its effectiveness.

## WHAT TO DO?

**Don't give up:** nausea is usually more severe at the start of treatment and tends to go away after two or three weeks, once your body has become used to the medication.

**Talk to your pharmacist about it:** changing the time at which the medication is taken and the way it is taken sometimes help control nausea.

For instance, if the medication should be taken with food, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about taking it in the middle or at the end of the meal.

Your doctor or pharmacist will recommend, for example, that you avoid taking the medication just before bedtime. It is preferable to take the medication 30 minutes before bedtime with a glass of water.

If several different drugs must be taken at the same time, talk to your pharmacist about the possibility of spacing them out.

**Nutritional advice:** meeting with a nutritionist can be a big help in identifying the foods that aggravate nausea, those that help decrease it, and those that are more easily digested when nausea is present.

- a) In general, avoid alcohol, coffee, tobacco and spicy or fatty foods.
- b) Eat frequent, small meals (every hour or two) of foods that you are able to tolerate.
- c) Space out eating and drinking by 30 minutes. Drink small quantities of liquids at a time.
- d) Begin meals with dry foods such as toast or crackers.
- e) Avoid eating while lying down. Wait 30 minutes before lying down after meals.
- f) Drinking hot water with lemon or ginger drinks can help control nausea.

**Pharmaceutical advice:** there are also products or drugs sold in the drug store to control nausea and vomiting. Dimenhydrinate (Gravol®) is the most frequently prescribed drug for nausea. Gravol® can be taken 30 minutes before the medication that causes nausea or 30 minutes before eating to make it easier to digest.

Sometimes the medication that causes nausea must be replaced with another medication that does not cause this side effect.

**Warning:** when nausea is due to food poisoning or the overconsumption of alcohol or food, you should not prevent yourself from vomiting because the body needs to get rid of the harmful substances.

## WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE A DOCTOR?

- When nausea is affecting your quality of life.
- When nausea is often accompanied by vomiting.
- When vomiting frequency increases or you have been vomiting for more than 24 or 48 hours.
- When nausea prevents you from eating properly, you are tired or have lost weight.
- When other symptoms are also present such as extreme fatigue, fever, rash (redness), stomach cramps, diarrhea, muscle or joint pain, light-coloured stools or dark-coloured urine.
- When you feel dehydrated, i.e. when you are thirsty and have a dry mouth and dry skin. If you feel dizzy, confused, tired, have a hard time remaining standing, or urinate very little.
- When you vomit blood.

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