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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Nausea and vomiting after surgery (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What are nausea and vomiting?

Nausea is the feeling you get when you think you might throw up. Vomiting is when you actually throw up. These 2 things can happen together. But sometimes people feel nauseated without throwing up.

Some people get nausea and vomiting after having surgery. Doctors call this "postoperative" nausea and vomiting. Although it is usually not serious, it can still be unpleasant. But there are ways to help prevent this, and to treat it if it happens.

What causes nausea and vomiting after surgery?

The most common cause is general anesthesia. "Anesthesia" is a medical term for different types of medicine people get before surgery or another procedure. General anesthesia makes you unconscious so you can't feel, see, or hear anything while your surgery is happening.

Not everyone who gets general anesthesia has nausea or vomiting after their surgery. But some people do. You are more likely to have nausea and vomiting after surgery if you:

- Had nausea or vomiting before your surgery
- Are female
- Are less than 50 years old
- Do not smoke
- Have had nausea and vomiting after surgery in the past
- Have had motion sickness in the past

- Get certain types of anesthesia medicines
- Get certain pain medicines after surgery

Nausea and vomiting are also more likely after certain types of surgery.

Can nausea and vomiting after surgery lead to problems?

Sometimes. It usually goes away on its own or with treatment. But in some cases, it can lead to problems, such as:

- Your incision (cut) from surgery opening up again
- Dehydration, which is when your body loses too much water

Taking medicines to prevent or treat nausea and vomiting can help you avoid these problems.

Can nausea and vomiting be prevented?

Yes. Doctors can do things to help lower your risk of nausea and vomiting after surgery. These might include:

- Using "regional anesthesia" – This type of anesthesia blocks pain in 1 area of your body, such as an arm, a leg, or the lower half of your body. Some procedures can be done this way instead of making you unconscious with general anesthesia. People who get regional anesthesia are less likely to have nausea and vomiting than people who get general anesthesia. Regional anesthesia can also be used to help prevent pain after surgery. This way, you are less likely to need medicines that can cause nausea and vomiting.
- Avoiding certain pain medicines – People who get pain medicines called "opioids" after surgery are more likely to have nausea and vomiting. Your doctor can give you other medicines before, during, and after surgery to help with your pain.
- Giving you medicines to prevent nausea and vomiting – There are many different medicines that can help prevent nausea and vomiting. Doctors call these "antiemetics." You might get medicine through a patch that goes on your skin. Other medicines are given through an IV (a thin tube that goes into a vein) or by mouth. Your doctor can give you these medicines before, during, or after your surgery.
- Acupuncture or acupressure – Acupuncture involves having tiny needles inserted into your body. Acupressure involves pressing on specific parts of the body to relieve pain and other

problems. Some people find that acupuncture or acupressure on the inside of the wrist helps with nausea and vomiting.

Before your surgery, your doctor will talk to you about your risk and preferences. You will decide together whether to do any of the above things to try to prevent nausea and vomiting.

How are nausea and vomiting treated?

If you do have nausea and vomiting, doctors can treat it with medicines. The medicines used for this are the same as the ones used to prevent nausea and vomiting. But there are many medicines in this group. Your doctor can give you different medicines if the ones you got before didn't work or have worn off.

How long does nausea and vomiting after surgery last?

It depends. Most people who have nausea and vomiting feel better within 24 hours after their surgery. In some cases, a person might need to stay longer in the hospital because they still have nausea and vomiting.

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