Nausea: Causes and treatments [1]

Dear Alice,

I wanted to know what I can take for nausea and what causes it?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Nausea is the sensation that accompanies the urge to vomit, though it doesn't necessarily have to lead to that in every case. If your nausea is combined with vomiting, it's key to consume as much fluid as possible without further aggravating your stomach. Slowly sip clear fluids, such as water, ginger ale, fruit juices, or fluid replacement (or sports) drinks. This will help restore fluids lost through vomiting.

Nausea has numerous causes. Nausea itself is not an illness, but rather a symptom of some other problem. The feeling of nausea occurs because the digestive system has slowed down, and sometimes digested food is actually moving in the wrong direction in the small intestine. What makes something like that happen? Several possibilities include:

- Motion and sea sickness
- Early pregnancy (a.k.a., morning sickness)
- Intense pain
- Emotional stress
- Gall bladder disease
- Food poisoning
- Enteroviruses (viruses affecting your intestinal system)
- Chemotherapy
- Bulimia
- Alcohol or "street" drugs, such as heroin, acid, PCP, ecstasy, and cocaine
- Some prescription and over-the-counter drugs

If you know the underlying cause of your nausea and/or vomiting, start with treating that underlying problem. See your health care provider if you experience nausea regularly.

As mentioned, many pregnant women experience nausea that's popularly referred to as morning sickness (though it can happen at any time in the day). It usually ends by the 12th to 14th week of pregnancy and no one is sure what causes it exactly. In the past, anti-emetic drugs (drugs to prevent vomiting) were prescribed for women with morning sickness, but
they're now reserved only for severe cases. One of the best ways to deal with morning sickness is to never allow the stomach to be empty, and to eat small, easily-digested meals frequently, rather than eating larger ones only three times a day.

Another common cause of nausea is motion sickness. Lying down when the nausea begins often helps people who have motion sickness. If you're motion sick, try to breathe fresh air (i.e., via an opened window), and avoid reading or any activity that forces you to focus on something closely while in motion. Several over-the-counter antihistamines (e.g., cyclizine, meclizine, or Marezine) might benefit some people. In the case of an extended trip, such as an ocean cruise, scopolamine skin patches might be the way to go. They require a prescription, and may produce some side effects, such as sleepiness, dry mouth, and impaired ability to see clearly.

In all cases of nausea, it's probably best to do the following:

- Lie down.
- Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol or caffeine.
- Regularly sip clear fluids.
- Steer clear of aspirin, Tylenol and other medications that could cause stomach upset.

When you begin to feel better, don't congratulate yourself with a big meal. Instead, take baby steps and eat smaller amounts of foods full of fiber, such as Bananas, Rice, Applesauce, and Toast (a.k.a., the BRAT diet). Avoid oily foods and dairy products until you feel totally recovered.

However, make an appointment with your health care provider if you experience any of the following:

- Bleeding or severe abdominal pain with vomiting
- Headache and stiffness of the neck
- Symptoms of dehydration, such as heightened thirst, dry mouth, peeing less often or not at all, diminished skin elasticity, sunken appearance of eyes, low blood pressure, rapid heart rate, and shock
- The inability to retain fluids for twelve hours for an adult or eight hours for a child
- Nausea that doesn't go away or dissipate for longer than six months in someone who's not pregnant

Some patients with severe illnesses, including cancer and HIV, use medical marijuana to treat the nausea, vomiting, pain, and loss of appetite that accompany those illnesses or their treatments (such as medication side effects or chemotherapy). There have been research findings on the benefits of medical marijuana, but not all states permit possession and/or use. Patients in some states can grow and use marijuana with their medical provider's recommendation; however, they theoretically can still be arrested and prosecuted under federal law. In addition, some states allow therapeutic research programs with Federal government cooperation. Because the legal situation around marijuana changes regularly, it is best to look carefully at the laws in your area before making any decisions. Also keep in mind that smoking marijuana does raise other potential health concerns (increased risk of lung problems for one).
Regardless of where a person lives, it's always good to discuss options with a health care provider.

Best of luck and hope you have a nausea-free time!

Alice!

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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUMC)
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