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 important 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. It's important to remember that nausea itself is not an illness, but rather a symptom of some other problem. You feel nauseated 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, it's important to treat 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 twelfth to fourteenth 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 (for example, 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, it's important to see 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 12 hours for an adult or 8 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 important to always discuss options with a health care provider.

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

Alice!

Category:
General Health [2]
Aches, Pains & Other Ailments [3]

Related questions

Nausea from weightlifting [5]
Smoking for stress relief [8]
How fast do food poisoning symptoms show up? [7]
Marijuana and chemotherapy [8]
Recurring flu symptoms, or something else? [9]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [10]
Medical Services (CUMC) [11]

Published date:
Mar 23, 2001
Last reviewed on:
May 26, 2015

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/nausea-causes-and-treatments