

# Vomiting and Your Health

For many people, vomiting starts as part of an attempt to regain control after breaking dietary rules or eating more than planned. This can often lead to a vicious cycle of eating and vomiting. When vomiting occurs regularly, it can affect health in a number of ways.

## Effects of Regular Vomiting



- Gastric acid enters the mouth and erodes tooth enamel, which leaves teeth vulnerable to erosion, brittleness, and thermal sensitivity. Expensive dental work can be needed to repair or replace the damaged tooth.
- Parotid (salivary) glands can swell up and cause the cheeks to look enlarged and puffy.
- Fingers and knuckles can become calloused and burned by gastric acid.
- Ruptures and bleeding can occur in the oesophagus as acid and food pieces are forcefully ejected.
- The digestive system can become dysregulated, so that even a small amount of food in the stomach feels uncomfortable.
- The ability to identify hunger and fullness is impaired.
- Imbalances in electrolytes, such as potassium and sodium, can result in fainting, fever, digestive problems, confusion, blood pressure changes, heart palpitations, seizures, cardiac arrest and even death.
- People sometimes try to hide their vomiting, which can involve actions such as lying or vomiting in odd places. This can impact social relationships as well as functioning at work and other responsibilities.
- People may feel guilt, shame, anxiety or depression - which can add to feeling worthless and out of control - and these feelings can trigger a binge. This can lead to additional vomiting, beginning the vicious cycle over again.

## Minimising Dental Damage

While prevention is the best option, there are ways to minimise the damage caused by regular vomiting.

- Gently brush teeth and spit without rinsing the toothpaste away—this leaves fluoride to strengthen the tooth enamel.
- Alternatively, rinsing with a mixture of baking soda and water can help neutralise gastric acid.
- Chew sugar free gum—this promotes saliva production which helps protect against acid.

## Challenging Myths About Vomiting

Often, vomiting can become a “safety net” because people think they can compensate for what they’ve eaten. Sometimes, people believe that if they vomit when they eat anything at all, they will lose weight. By challenging beliefs about vomiting, people can reverse the vicious cycle of eating and purging. This along with other strategies, can help minimise the physical and mental effects by vomiting.

*Myth 1: Vomiting gets rid of the calories I’ve consumed*

**FACT: Research has shown that vomiting cannot get rid of all the calories ingested, even when done immediately after eating.**

A vomit can only remove up to about half of the calories eaten - which means that, realistically, between half to two thirds of what is eaten is absorbed by the body. This is because absorption begins in the mouth (through the saliva), continues in the oesophagus, and then in the stomach. Even if the entire stomach contents is vomited up, many of the calories will have already been ingested.

This explains why many people with bulimia maintain an average weight, even if they restrict food outside of binges - they still ingest most of the binge.

*Myth 2: Vomiting helps prevent weight gain*

**FACT: Vomiting tends to encourage overeating and weight gain.**

Vomiting gives a false sense of security, because believing that it is a safety net can lead to larger and more frequent binges - people can think that if they are going to vomit anyway, they may as well eat more. Believing that vomiting compensates for eating actually makes overeating more likely, and over time, increase the amount eaten during binges and greater calorie intake. The eat and purge cycle also causes metabolic changes that accelerate weight gain. Due to the vomiting process, the body is primed to compensate for the loss of potential nutrients by preserving energy and slowing the metabolic rate. These changes can last a long time, and contribute to increased weight gain over time.



Regular check-ups with a GP and dentist can help monitor and minimise some of the negative effects of vomiting on health. While it can sometimes be difficult to tell people about vomiting, remember that they are there to help and not judge.