

Nausea and vomiting in pregnancy

This information sheet has been given to you to help answer some of the questions you may have about nausea and vomiting during your pregnancy. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the nurse caring for you.

What is nausea and vomiting in pregnancy?

Sickness in pregnancy is common. Around seven out of 10 pregnant women experience nausea and/or vomiting, and this doesn't just occur in the morning. The term 'morning sickness' is often used to describe this condition when symptoms are relatively mild, temporary and more troublesome than serious.

For most women, this improves or disappears completely by around week 12. Although for some women it can last longer, and resolve or stop by week 20. A few women find that it continues beyond that time and occasionally it lasts for the whole pregnancy.

Very rarely, vomiting is so severe that it leads to dehydration (excessive loss of water and salts from the body) and serious weight loss. This is known as hyperemesis gravidarum (HG), and often needs hospital treatment. Exactly how many pregnant women get HG is not known, but is thought to be around 1 in every 100.

Is not known what causes HG, or why some women get it and others don't. Some experts believe that it is linked to the changing hormones in your body that occur during pregnancy.

What are the symptoms of HG and how long do they last?

Symptoms can be mild or severe. They may include:

- prolonged and severe nausea
- persistent and excessive daily vomiting
- inability to keep down fluids and food
- tiredness
- light-headedness
- weight loss
- producing too much saliva (ptyalism)
- low blood pressure
- rapid heart beat (tachycardia).

Will morning sickness hurt my baby?

Morning sickness is unpleasant with dramatic symptoms, but the good news is that it is unlikely to harm your baby if treated effectively. However if it causes you to lose weight during pregnancy, there is an increased risk that your baby may be born smaller than expected. This is why it is important to be monitored for dehydration.

If you are unable to keep any foods or fluids down and begin to lose a lot of weight, you must see your GP or come to the Early Pregnancy and Acute Gynaecology Unit (EPAGU) for assessment. Please see the contact details for EPAGU at the end of this leaflet.

Will I need any tests?

On arrival at the EPAGU we will ask you for a urine sample, which will be tested for ketones (a chemical that builds up when your body is unable to use blood sugar and breaks down fat instead). This tells us how dehydrated you are. We might also take blood tests to check your kidney and liver function, which can be affected in severe cases of HG.

What treatments are available?

Depending on the severity of your symptoms and the test results, you may be given:

- dietary advice
- anti-sickness medication to take home
- anti-sickness medication by injection
- intravenous fluids (given through a drip) to correct your dehydration until the vomiting is controlled in the EPAGU Hyperemesis Outpatient Clinic
- in extreme cases you may need to stay in hospital overnight (usually on the gynaecology ward) so we can monitor you and treat/prevent dehydration.

The hospital has a gstt@home service which is where care is given to you at home that would otherwise would be carried out in hospital. This service is for patients living within Lambeth and Southwark. A member of staff will discuss this with you if it's appropriate for you.

What happens if I do not get treatment?

If you do not get treatment your condition may resolve on its own if the symptoms are mild. However, if the vomiting does not stop or it becomes more frequent and you are not able to eat or drink anything, it is important to get medical advice so that you do not become too dehydrated.

Is there anything I can do to help?

Although there is no evidence that nausea and vomiting in pregnancy can be prevented, vomiting during pregnancy sometimes may be reduced by lifestyle changes.

- Try to keep a positive attitude. Nausea and vomiting usually stops after three months of pregnancy.
- Avoid foods or smells that trigger your symptoms.
- Rest, especially after meals, as tiredness may increase nausea.
- Get plenty of fresh air.
- Try and relax and avoid stress.
- **Always drink plenty of water, but little and often to help avoid dehydration.**
- Have a snack as often as every hour or two during the day.
- While nauseated, eat low-fat, bland foods. For example, crackers, English muffins, toast, baked chicken and fish, potatoes, noodles, rice and low-fat dairy products.

- Keep a light snack such as a savoury biscuit or cracker by your bed and eat it within 20 minutes of getting up in the morning, or if you wake in the night, to help prevent sickness in the morning.
- Low calorie, high protein diets are associated with a reduction of nausea and vomiting in pregnancy.
- Eat foods with a lot of water in them. Try clear soups, ice lollies and fruit jelly.
- Avoid coffee and alcohol.
- Ginger is a traditional remedy for nausea, so try root ginger or ginger tea. Ginger ale or ginger biscuits may also help. Before taking pure ginger check with your doctor, pharmacist or midwife if you are taking any prescribed medicines particularly medicines that thin the blood (such as aspirin) or medicines for high blood pressure.
- If you are producing too much saliva, suck or drink fresh lemon or lime.
- Complementary therapies such as acupuncture, acupressure or hypnotherapy may help some people. Herbal remedies such as chamomile and peppermint may also help.

How you might feel?

- anxious about going out or being too far from home, in case you need to vomit
- isolated, because you don't know anyone who understands what it's like to have HG
- confused as to why this is happening to you
- unsure whether you can cope with the rest of the pregnancy if you continue to feel very ill.

When should I come to hospital?

You should come to hospital if you can't keep any food and fluid down without vomiting for at least 24 hours. Come sooner rather than later and don't wait until the evening if you're unwell. If your treatment starts later and you are unwell there may be delays in completing the treatment in EPAGU and you may need to stay in hospital overnight. EPAGU is open between 9am and 6.30pm Monday to Friday, and 9.30am to 3.15pm at weekends and bank holidays – outside these hours please go to the Emergency Department.

Blood clots and HG

Because HG can cause dehydration, there is also an increased risk of having deep vein thrombosis (a blood clot), although this is rare. If you are dehydrated and immobile, there is treatment that you can be given to prevent blood clots.

Useful sources of information

Pregnancy Sickness Support is a registered UK charity working to improve care, treatment and support for women suffering from nausea and vomiting in pregnancy and HG:

w: www.pregnancysicknesssupport.org.uk

p: 024 7638 2020

Contact us

If you have any concerns about vomiting in pregnancy or HG, please contact the Early Pregnancy and Acute Gynaecology Unit (EPAGU) on 020 7188 0864 between 9am and 6.30pm Monday to Friday, and 9.30am to 3.15pm at weekends and bank holidays.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and Accessible Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership