

Severe nausea and vomiting in pregnancy (Hyperemesis Gravidarum)



BDA The Association
of UK Dietitians

Maternal and
Fertility Nutrition



Pregnancy
Sickness
Support

What is Hyperemesis Gravidarum?

Hyperemesis Gravidarum (HG) is a severe form of nausea and vomiting in pregnancy. It is not typical “morning sickness”. You may feel sick all day and vomit or retch many times in a day. You may not be able to eat or drink normally and your symptoms may affect your daily activities.

What causes it?

It is not known why some women have HG and others do not. Research shows that hormonal changes contribute to the condition and genetics may be another factor. If your mother, grandmother or sister experienced HG, you are more likely to suffer from it.

How do I manage it?

Severe nausea and vomiting may cause malnutrition, weight loss and dehydration. It can also be an isolating and helpless time for you and your family and friends.

The good news is there are many things that you can do to improve your symptoms, and to help yourself feel better. HG is not likely to harm your baby if you get the treatment and support you need. However you need nutrients and fluid to stay well and help baby grow.

Who is this leaflet for?

It is for those affected by HG and their family/support network. This booklet contains information on managing HG, to help support a healthy pregnancy and provide your baby with the best start.

Who can support me?

Many people can help you during your pregnancy. Each healthcare professional has a different role.

Availability of different healthcare professionals may vary in each hospital/area.

Please ask for help and do not suffer in silence.



Severe nausea and sickness can be managed in a combination of ways:



Medicine



Fluids



Food



Coping strategies



Know when to
ask for help

1. Anti-sickness medicines

- There are many safe anti-sickness medicines that can be taken in pregnancy. Some medicines may work better for you than others. Talk to your GP or midwife about available medicines.
- It is important to always take medications as prescribed by your doctor. Some medications relieve your symptoms when you feel sick, others need to be taken regularly to prevent you feeling sick.
- If your medication is not helping you to feel better, **ask if you can try a different medication or a combination that may work better for you.**
- If reflux or heartburn is an issue, you can take Rennie's or Gaviscon or talk to your doctor about getting a prescription medication.
- If you are feeling better and thinking about stopping your medication, it is important you do not stop taking your medication suddenly, as your symptoms may come back. Speak to your medical team for advice on how to reduce your medication gradually.

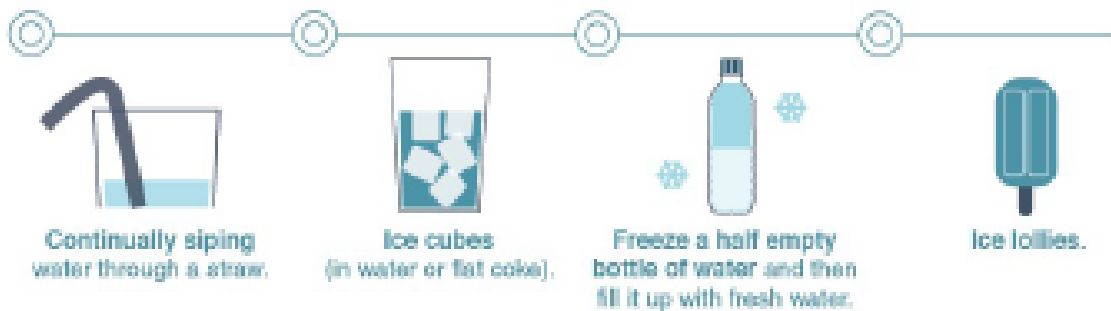


2. Fluids

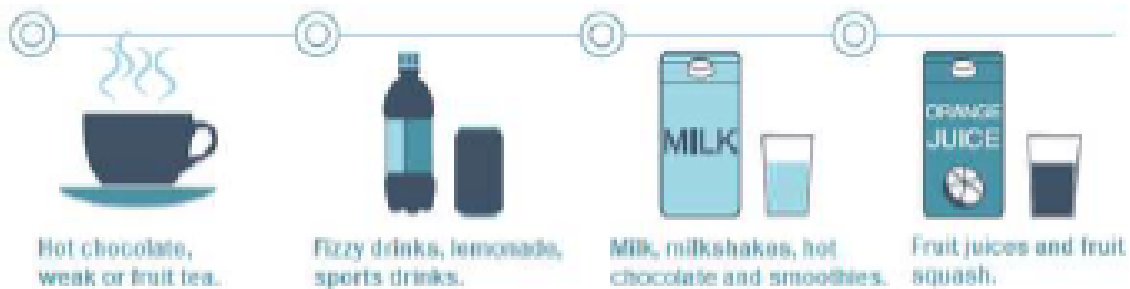
Staying hydrated by drinking enough fluids can help you feel better and avoid you becoming dehydrated.

- Aim to drink 100-200mls (a small cup) each hour through the day.
- Sugary/sports drinks will provide some energy and fluid when you are struggling to eat food. Choose caffeine-free options.
- See the pictures below for other ideas if you are struggling to get enough fluid in.

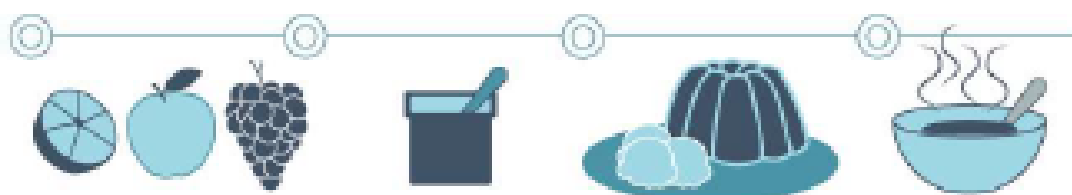
Try drinking water in different ways



Try flavoured fluids instead of water



Try eating foods with a higher water content



Pale yellow urine means you are well-hydrated. The darker your urine, the more risk there is to be dehydrated. If you are dehydrated, drink more fluids. If you can't, contact the hospital.

3. Eating when you are unwell

Once you are properly hydrated, the next step is to eat enough to keep your energy up and prevent weight loss. Don't worry if your diet is not the best while you are sick. Focus on eating foods you feel like eating and are able to manage.

The following tips might help improve your intake and reduce your symptoms:

- Try eating 6-7 small meals/snacks throughout the day. It may help to have food and drinks separately.
- Eat something within 30 minutes of waking. For some people, it may help to take your anti-sickness tablets, eat something small (e.g. a cracker) and wait 15-20 minutes before getting up.
- Have food prepared in advance and keep stocks of easily prepared snacks (e.g. cheese and crackers, tinned soup, noodles, breadsticks, cereal).
- Eat more when you are hungry, not necessarily at scheduled breaks or usual times. Often you will spend most of the time too nauseated to eat, then hunger will strike very quickly. This is your window of opportunity to eat something and if you miss it, you may well be unable to eat anything again for the rest of the day.

Nothing is off the menu!

Allow yourself to eat whatever food you fancy. You can eat healthier choices when you are feeling a bit better.

Experiment with different flavours and textures:

Perceptions of flavours and textures often change with severe sickness. If you can manage one food from the categories below, you may be able to manage the others.

Salty foods:

- Popcorn/crisps
- Slices of ham/cheese
- Vegetable/chicken soup
- Potato wedges/chips
- Noodles/plain pasta

Dry foods:

- Bread/toast
- Dry cereal
- Biscuits
- Flapjack
- Dried fruit/fruit bar

Sweet foods:

- Fresh or tinned fruit
- Ice cream/sorbet
- Custard/yoghurt
- Porridge with honey
- Cake/muffin

Bland foods:

- Rice
- Bagel/crumpet
- Pancakes/waffle
- Crackers/breadsticks
- Plain yoghurt

What about pregnancy vitamins?

All pregnant women are recommended to take 400mcg folic acid during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and 10mcg Vitamin D throughout pregnancy. Some women may require a higher dose of folic acid (available on prescription) if they have particular medical conditions.

Some people find that pregnancy multivitamins make their sickness worse. If this is the case:

- Liquid or gummy vitamins may be easier to take.
- Choose separate folic acid and vitamin D supplements. Vitamin D is also available in a spray form from some health food shops.
- Speak to your doctor, dietitian or midwife if you have any questions about pregnancy vitamins.

4. Coping strategies

Alongside a good treatment plan there are various things you can do to try and minimise the effects of HG.

It is rare to feel complete relief, but you may be able to manage some of the symptoms using coping strategies.

It is easy to get overwhelmed and feel isolated when you are feeling so ill. Here are some tips that other people have used to cope:

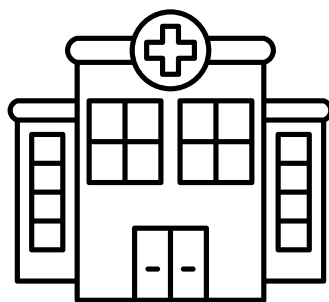
- Rest whenever you can. Early pregnancy can be very tiring and this can make sickness feel worse.
- Avoid bright lights, loud noises and strong smells.
- Cooking smells are often unbearable so avoid cooking as much as possible and make sure that windows are open, and you are far from the kitchen while it is going on.
- It is common to feel sick when brushing teeth. Try using a mild mouth wash and brush your teeth when able.
- Chewing gum or mints may help if you have a bad taste in your mouth.
- Many women need time off from work or reduced hours, speak to your employer and/or GP about your needs.
- If you have friends or family around, ask for help with practical tasks so that you can rest (e.g. running errands, looking after other children, helping around the house).
- Avoid thinking ahead more than the next few days. Take one day at a time and at the end of the day acknowledge that you have one less day to get through
- Speak to others if you are feeling low. Either talk to a friend or contact one of the support groups listed overleaf.

5. Knowing when to get medical help

- There may be times when you need to have your medications adjusted or you may need extra fluids and vitamins given via a drip.
- Depending on your local hospital, you may need to be admitted to hospital for this to happen or you may be able to access this as a day admission.
- It can be difficult to know when you are "sick enough" to come to hospital, but by monitoring your symptoms, hydration and weight at home you can seek help early.

Signs that you may need extra help:

- Worsening nausea and vomiting score (see next page)
- Difficulty keeping down food or fluid (if you can't keep down any food or fluid, please go to A&E)
- Feeling faint or dizzy
- Dark coloured urine or passing less urine.
- Losing weight (see next page)



If you are concerned about your symptoms,
please phone your local maternity unit,
or phone 111

Monitoring your nausea and vomiting score:

You can use these questions to score your symptoms. If your score is over 7, phone your maternity assessment unit for advice

Circle the answer that best suits your situation in the last 24 hours

1. *On average in a day, for how long do you feel nauseated or sick to your stomach?*

Not at all	< 1 hour	2-3 hours	4-6 hours	> 6 hours
1 point	2 points	3 points	4 points	5 points

2. *On average in a day, how many times do you vomit or throw up?*

Not at all	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	7 or more
1 point	2 points	3 points	4 points	5 points

3. *On average in a day, how many times have you had retching or dry heaves without bringing anything up?*

Not at all	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	7 or more
1 point	2 points	3 points	4 points	5 points

Total score is a sum of replies to questions 1, 2 and 3.

6 or less = mild symptoms, 7-12 = moderate symptoms, 13 and above = severe symptoms

Monitoring your weight

- The amount of weight gained in pregnancy is variable and will depend on factors including your pre-pregnancy weight.
- Weight gain in the first trimester may be minimal (1-5kg or 2-10 lbs), however **weight loss** during pregnancy is not normal.
- If you have lost 5% or more of your pre pregnancy weight, please speak to a health professional about this, you may be helped by having specialist nutrition drinks, which can be arranged by a dietitian or doctor.
- It is useful to weight yourself every 1-2 weeks and keep a record.



Useful websites and resources

Pregnancy Sickness Support UK:

<https://www.pregnancysicknesssupport.org.uk/>

A UK-based charity that provides a helpline, peer support and webchat services.

@pregnancysicknesssupport

Details of local maternity services:

This leaflet was produced by the Maternal and Fertility Nutrition Group of the British Dietetic Association and the UK Pregnancy Sickness Support charity.

Adapted with permission from resources developed by the dietitians at the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin and National Maternity Hospital, Dublin.

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