

Leicestershire Adult Eating Disorders Service

Health problems resulting from eating disorders

REPEATED VOMITING

This leaflet provides information for patients about some of the physical problems that may result from repeated vomiting. The aim of this leaflet is to provide you with information that is important to you, not to worry you or upset you. The information in this leaflet may raise questions to discuss with your doctor or therapist. It will help explain why you may need certain blood tests or other investigations.

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Reviewed: May 2025
Review due: May 2026

Repeated self-induced vomiting

Many people with eating disorders make themselves vomit. This can become frequent and habitual, and difficult to change.

For some people, as well as being an effort to manage weight, vomiting can become a means of dealing with difficult emotions, or become a kind of self-punishment.

With binge eating, vomiting afterwards may form a vicious circle, each problem reinforcing the other and making change still harder.

People generally hate vomiting and feel very ashamed about their habit, but find it hard to stop.

Important fact: Many people are surprised to learn that vomiting after eating is actually a rather ineffective method of getting rid of food. A lot of food will already have passed down beyond the stomach into the intestine, and still more is pushed down when the stomach contracts to vomit. So despite vomiting, probably only about half the food eaten is expelled.

Health problems caused by repeated vomiting

- Electrolyte disturbances

Vomiting causes the loss of important body salts, known as electrolytes. The loss is increased by attempts to wash out food by repeatedly drinking water and vomiting. The most important electrolyte which becomes depleted is called **potassium**. Potassium is vital to life because of its role in the conduction of electrical impulses through the heart, which make the heart beat. When potassium levels in the body fall, the heart may lose its regular beating rhythm. This may cause faintness or loss of consciousness. At very low potassium levels, a cardiac arrest can occur, and death may follow.

Symptoms of low potassium include general weakness, muscle cramps and tetany (involuntary contraction of

muscles). However, patients can have low potassium levels without having any symptoms and so feeling well is not necessarily reassuring.

Your doctor or therapist may check your potassium level with a blood test (urea and electrolytes). If necessary, they may also check the heart rhythm with an ECG (electrocardiograph). If your potassium is low, you may be prescribed potassium tablets. Very severe cases may require admission to a medical ward for intravenous potassium replacement. Of course these measures won't help for long if the frequent vomiting continues. The only lasting way to maintain normal safe potassium levels is to decrease and stop vomiting. Be aware the vomiting is particularly dangerous if it's used in combination with other things that cause loss of potassium and fluid e.g. laxatives and diuretics (water tablets).

- Dehydration

Repeated vomiting can cause dehydration, which can cause dizziness, fainting and headache.

- Kidney problems

Low potassium and dehydration can, in time, lead to kidney disease

- Teeth and face

Stomach acid in the mouth erodes dental enamel, and leads to thinning of teeth. The dentist might notice these changes before you do. Dentists advise against brushing teeth for at least an hour after vomiting. Instead, rinse with a fluoride mouthwash or sodium bicarbonate or if those are not available, then with water. However, the only way to protect your teeth fully is to stop vomiting.

The salivary glands in the cheeks may enlarge, giving the face a swollen appearance. This swelling may be misinterpreted as weight gain and cause further distress and vomiting.

- The gut

Frequent vomiting can cause tears to the gut. These may cause bleeding, pain, and anaemia.

If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this leaflet you can raise these with your doctor or therapist or leave a message with our secretaries on 0116 225 2557.

