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.

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.