

# Vomiting and Your Health

Individuals experiencing an eating disorder may use self-induced vomiting as a way to compensate for, or 'undo' the effects of eating, or to regain control after breaking a dietary rule. 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 Self-Induced Vomiting

- Gastric acid enters the mouth and erodes tooth enamel, which can leave teeth vulnerable to erosion, brittleness, and thermal sensitivity. Dental work may be needed to repair or replace damaged teeth.
- 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.
- Some individuals may try to hide their vomiting by using secretive behaviours (e.g., choosing unusual places to vomit). These behaviours can affect relationships and interfere with daily life.
- People may experience guilt, shame, anxiety, or depression. These emotions can trigger a binge, followed by vomiting, and this cycle can repeat itself over time.



## Minimising Dental Damage

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

- After vomiting, wait an hour or longer before brushing your teeth. Instead, rinse your mouth with a fluoride mouthwash, or a mixture of baking soda and water to help neutralise gastric acid.
- When you do brush, use a small-headed toothbrush with soft to medium bristles and a high fluoride toothpaste. Gently brush teeth and spit without rinsing the toothpaste away—this leaves fluoride to strengthen the tooth enamel. Toothpastes with higher concentrations of fluoride are available from pharmacies.

## Challenging Myths About Vomiting

Often, vomiting can become a “safety net” because people may believe that they can compensate for what they’ve eaten. Or that vomiting will help them control weight gain or even promote weight loss. These beliefs are not only misleading but can also be harmful. By challenging beliefs about vomiting, people can reverse the vicious cycle of eating and purging.

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

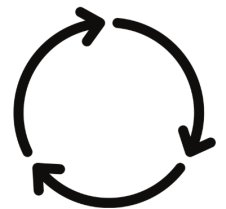
**FACT: Research has shown that vomiting cannot get rid of all the calories ingested, even when done immediately after eating.**

A vomit can only remove up to about half of the calories eaten - which means that, between half to two thirds of what is eaten is absorbed by the body. This happens because absorption starts in the mouth via saliva, continues through the oesophagus, and then into the stomach. So even if someone vomits immediately after eating, many of the calories will have already been absorbed.

*Myth 2: Vomiting helps prevent weight gain*

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

Vomiting can give a false sense of control. Some people believe that if they're going to vomit anyway, they might as well eat more. This mindset can lead to bigger and more frequent binges. Thinking that vomiting “undoes” the eating actually makes overeating more likely, and over time, people may eat more during binges and take in more calories overall. 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. Though it can be uncomfortable, being open with your GP and dentist about self-induced vomiting will mean that they are in the best position to look after your health.