

# How do you look after a vomiting drunk friend?

**Helping a drunk friend can be difficult and potentially dangerous. Often, the person may be aggressive and uncooperative. While it is important to try to keep your friend safe, the first priority must always be your personal safety. Never be afraid to pass the problem over to someone else, particularly if they become violent. If in doubt, always call 000.**

**Vomiting can be life-threatening even when alcohol is not involved. If a vomiting person has been drinking alcohol it can cause them to lose a natural response called the 'gag reflex'. With no gag reflex a person is in danger of choking on their own vomit, particularly if they lose consciousness. If you are worried about a friend's wellbeing, for any reason, call 000 immediately.**

**ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR.**

Whether you are drink alcohol or not, there are some simple things you can do to look after a vomiting drunk friend:

- **Stay with them and monitor them closely**
- **Keep them upright as possible and never lay them down**
- **Give them a plastic bucket or bowl**
- **Get them to rinse their mouth out regularly**
- **Keep them warm**
- **Reassure them**
- **If in doubt, call 000 immediately**

Be aware that the police do not routinely attend an ambulance call, even if there are illegal drugs involved. The only reason the police will usually attend is if the paramedics ask them to be there. This is usually due to another crime taking place or the threat of violence.

Vomiting occurs when the stomach, as well as a number of other internal organs, becomes overstimulated. This is usually caused by irritation to these areas, sending impulses to the vomiting centre in the brain stem. These impulses may also trigger the sensation of nausea that usually accompanies vomiting. The vomiting centre then sends messages to parts of your body, particularly the diaphragm and the abdominal muscles, forcing the contents of the stomach out of the mouth.

## Why do you vomit when you have been drinking?

Alcohol irritates your entire digestive system, including your stomach. Drinking any amount of alcohol causes your stomach to produce more acid than usual and can result in a range of problems such as stomach aches, diarrhea and vomiting.

Vomiting is more likely to occur when someone has drunk to excess and is at risk of alcohol poisoning (for more details on alcohol poisoning see the fact sheet 'Alcohol poisoning'). As the body is no longer able to handle the amount of alcohol within it, the

vomiting centre of the brain attempts to expel the potentially harmful amounts of alcohol out as fast as it can. Although usually caused by drinking to excess, some people may experience vomiting even from small amounts of alcohol.

## What is the greatest danger associated with vomiting when you are drunk?

When a person is extremely drunk the depressant effects of alcohol slow down the brain's ability to trigger the 'gag reflex', a motor response from the body that prevents choking. With no gag reflex a person is in danger of choking on their own vomit, accidentally inhaling it into their lungs. This can lead to asphyxiation, or the inability to breathe, that leads to sudden death, particularly if they lose consciousness.

Another potential risk for prolonged vomiting is the potential for dehydration, which can lead to brain damage or even death. This is unusual, however, with dehydration being more likely when vomiting occurs in combination with severe diarrhoea or prolonged time in the sun.

### Medical Disclaimer

The information provided on this fact sheet is provided for information purposes only. As such it **cannot substitute for the advice of a medical professional**

## How do you look after a vomiting drunk friend?

### What if you see blood in vomit?

Blood in vomit can be a sign that something is seriously wrong. Vomiting, particularly prolonged vomiting, can cause the person to tear or rupture something, resulting in bleeding. Internal bleeding of any kind could be agitated by alcohol and you should call 000 immediately.

Sometimes a drunk person simply bites the inside of their mouth or their tongue while vomiting and this can result in spots of blood being seen. Regardless, it is better to be safe than sorry, if you see blood in vomit it is vital that you seek medical help as soon as possible.

### What if they have a seizure or a fit?

Seizures or fits are not common place but can happen if someone is extremely intoxicated. If this occurs it is vital that the person is treated by medical professionals and you need to call 000 immediately.

### Is 'dry retching' dangerous?

'Dry retching' usually happens once the person has finished vomiting (i.e., emptying the contents of the stomach) and occurs because there is simply not enough material left to be vomited efficiently. Dry retching is often described as much more painful and traumatic than the rest of the vomiting process and can also be quite frightening for the person looking after them. If dry retching persists, it can, in extreme cases, result in damage to the oesophagus, causing bleeding and tearing. If this occurs it is vital that the person is treated by medical professionals and you need to call 000 immediately.

### Things to do if your drunk friend is vomiting

- **Stay with them and monitor them closely** – never leave them alone, not even for a minute
- **Keep them as upright as possible and never lay them down** – it is very important for anyone vomiting from alcohol to sit as upright as possible. If they cannot sit up then the person should lay on their side in the recovery position
- **Give them a plastic bucket or bowl** – make sure they are somewhere safe where they can be watched and avoid propping them up on a toilet. There have been cases of facial injuries due to a drunk person passing out while vomiting in a toilet

- **Get them to rinse their mouth out regularly** – drinking even small amounts could trigger more vomiting but rinsing can remove the foul taste and the burning stomach acids. Soak a cloth in cold water and get them to suck on it – this prevents them from gulping the water down but allows to keep their mouth a little fresher
- **Keep them warm** – if they are very drunk the alcohol can cause their body temperature to drop and possibly lead to hypothermia. Drape something over their shoulders, particularly if they are outdoors
- **Reassure them** – when you are vomiting it feels like it will never end, telling them that you will stay with them and that they will get better isn't going to make it finish any earlier but it can make them feel a little safer knowing you are there
- **If in doubt, call 000 immediately**

Be aware that the police do not routinely attend an ambulance call, even if there are illegal drugs involved. The only reason the police will usually attend is if the paramedics ask them to be there. This is usually due to another crime taking place or the threat of violence.

### Things to do once your drunk friend has finished vomiting

- **Stay with them** – even though they have vomited they are still not sober. Even though some people say they feel as if they have sobered up completely once they finish vomiting, this is actually due to a flood of endorphins released at that time. This feeling doesn't last for long and the person needs to be watched carefully
- **Get them to sip cold water to prevent dehydration** – get them to rinse their mouth out thoroughly to remove stomach acid. Wait for a reasonable amount of time before drinking larger amounts as this could trigger another round of vomiting. When they do drink, make sure it is water or sports drinks and avoid anything acidic like juices
- **Make sure they get home safely and check on them the day after** – vomiting is a traumatic experience, both physically and psychologically, and it can take some time for the person to recover. Getting them home or handing them over to someone you trust is important but giving them a reassuring call the next day can make all the difference