

How do you look after a vomiting drunk friend?

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.

Whether you are drinking 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 as upright as possible and never lay them down**
- **give them a plastic bucket or bowl and make sure they are somewhere safe where they can be watched**
- **get them to rinse their mouth out regularly**
- **keep them warm**
- **reassure them**
- **if in doubt, call 000 immediately**

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.

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, call 000.

ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR

What causes vomiting?

Vomiting occurs when the stomach, as well as a number of other internal organs, becomes over stimulated. This is usually caused by irritation to these areas sending impulses to the vomiting centre in the brain. These impulses may also trigger the sensation of nausea that usually accompanies vomiting. The vomiting centre in the brain 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 ache, diarrhea and vomiting.

Vomiting is more likely to occur when someone has drunk too much 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 what has been consumed, the vomiting centre of the brain attempts to force out the potentially harmful amounts of alcohol as fast as it can. Some people may experience vomiting even after drinking relatively 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 unintentionally inhaling vomit into their lungs, which can cause choking, suffocation and 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

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occurs in combination with severe diarrhea or prolonged time in the sun.

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 of what the cause is, it is better to be safe than sorry and, 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 commonplace but can happen if someone is extremely drunk. If this occurs, it is vital that medical professionals treat the person. You need to call 000 immediately.

Is 'dry retching' dangerous?

'Dry retching' usually happens once the person has finished vomiting (i.e., they have emptied 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 medical professionals treat the person. 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. Letting a friend go to the toilet to be sick, or anywhere else for that matter, is a potentially life-threatening situation. If the person passes out and they've locked the door, how is help going to get in?

Keep them as upright as possible and never lay them down

– if they are laying on their back they are difficult to monitor effectively and, if they vomit even a small amount, there is the very real risk of choking. If your friend is so drunk that they are unable to sit up, place them on their side in the recovery position and watch them carefully.

Give them a plastic bucket or bowl and make sure they are somewhere safe where they can be watched

– avoid propping them up by the toilet. There have been cases of serious injuries due to a person passing out or falling to sleep and smashing their face against a toilet bowl.

Get them to rinse their mouth out regularly

– drinking even small amounts could trigger more vomiting. However, rinsing can remove the foul taste and the burning stomach acids. Soak a clean cloth in cold water and get your friend to suck on it – this prevents them from gulping water down but helps to keep their mouth a little fresher.

Keep them warm – alcohol can cause a drop in body temperature, possibly leading to hypothermia. If your friend is cold and shivering, place something warm around them, 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 – this does not always mean calling 000 as most vomiting drunk people do not need to be treated by medical professionals. That said, looking after drunk people who are vomiting can be frightening, particularly for young people. As soon as you feel you're not able to deal with the situation, pass the problem onto a sober, responsible adult. You won't get into trouble for calling an ambulance and even if one arrives and the situation has resolved itself, it's better to be safe than sorry.

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Things to do once your drunk friend has stopped vomiting

Stay with them – even though they have stopped vomiting, they will not be sober. Some people say that once they stop vomiting they feel as if they have sobered up completely. This feeling is due to a burst of endorphins (natural painkillers) that are released when vomiting. This feeling doesn't last for long and the person needs to be watched carefully.

Get them to sip cold water – make sure they 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 fruit juices.

Make sure they get home safely and check on them the next day

Once they start to feel a little better, make sure they rehydrate before you let them leave. Alcohol is a diuretic, meaning it removes fluids from the body and so drinking too much can lead to dehydration. This causes many of the symptoms of a hangover. If the person feels bad now, they're highly likely to feel much worse the morning after. Drinking a couple of glasses of water at the end of the night is not going to completely prevent a hangover but it will help to some extent.

If your friend has had a bad experience with alcohol at a party or gathering, it is highly likely that others are aware of what happened. Vomiting in a public place, particularly when you are drunk, can be an embarrassing and traumatic experience, and it can take some time for the person to recover. Getting your friend home safely or handing them over to someone you trust is important but giving them a reassuring call the next day to make sure they're okay can make all the difference to how they cope with what happened to them.