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From the Desk of the DDSN Medical Consultant

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FROM THE DESK OF THE DDSN MEDICAL CONSULTANT

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Pay attention to vomiting
- Find a cause for vomiting.
- Dehydration, Bowel Obstruction, Infections can all be serious.
- Avoid aspiration and dehydration.

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VOMITING

Vomiting is an unpleasant experience. It has many causes and some are serious. In our care for our consumers, we need to be alert for the possibility that vomiting and any associated changes may mean that they have a problem that needs action.

Definitions:

- Vomiting is the forceful expulsion of stomach content from the mouth.
- Retching is the labored, rhythmic contractions of abdominal and chest muscles that accompany this.
- Nausea often comes before vomiting. It is the feeling in the throat or stomach that we need to or are about to vomit. Nausea can be associated with loss of appetite, even aversion to food, sweating, excess saliva in the mouth, and even low pulse rate and blood pressure.

Vomiting occurs as the result of an organized set of muscle activity. The abdominal muscles tighten increasing the pressure inside the abdomen. The lower end of the stomach tightens and the upper end relaxes, and the pressure allows the stomach contents into the esophagus where they are pushed up and out the mouth by pressure in the chest, caused by the chest muscle contraction wave of retching.

Some Causes:

There are many causes for vomiting and they vary with person, place and time. For example, many pregnant women have morning sickness; some people do not do well on a bumpy airplane flight.

This note concentrates on the circumstances of our consumers and the situations we may need to be aware of. Other circumstances and other people will have a different list of concerns.

VOMITING MAY BE A SIGNAL OF A SERIOUS CONDITION THAT NEEDS IMMEDIATE

Bowel Obstruction (or other serious bowel problems)

The person may not be eating, they may have a change in bowel motions, a distended abdomen or pain in the belly. Vomiting may be forceful or quiet. Remember, the risk is higher if the person has pica. Sometimes appendicitis or gall bladder disease can cause vomiting and pain.

Severe Infection

When a consumer has a severe infection with pneumonia or urinary tract infection, they can cause vomiting as an early symptom. The person may or may not have a fever and may look sick.

Sometimes there are other clues like increased breathing rate. Gastrointestinal infections like gastroenteritis can also cause vomiting.

Dehydration

If vomiting causes a loss of fluids and there is reduced intake, the person can get very sick from dehydration. There can be reduced amounts of dark urine, reduced sweat, dry mouth, lax dry skin, light-headedness and this can lead to collapse. To avoid dehydration, we need to give fluids that balance the persons losses, particularly if they have repeated vomiting or vomiting and diarrhea. If this cannot be done, the person should seek medical help.

VOMITING MAY SIGNAL A CONDITION THAT NEEDS TREATMENT

Significant Gastroesophageal Reflux (GERD) with the stomach contents flowing back into the esophagus can sometime lead into vomiting. The acid reflux can cause damage in the esophagus with a risk of bleeding (bright blood or dark changed blood that look like coffee grounds).

Vomiting means stomach contents are passing the airway opening and there is a risk of aspiration into the lungs. We need to position a person on their side if they are lying down.

Medication effects may cause nausea and vomiting. Dosage may need adjustment or the drug may need to be changed. Some medications to note are digoxin, some anticancer drugs, some anticonvulsants and some antibiotics.

Vomiting in any person with a

headache or head injury needs investigation. This may indicate a migraine attack with a past history to compare to or may indicate a significant head injury. Remember we may or may not see injuries happen.

Stress itself can lead to a person vomiting (e.g. stage fright) We need to be aware of changes in our consumer's life and mood.

Diabetic patients who vomit may have significant changes in blood sugar and other illness.

Vomiting and pallor often go together as nausea develops. If the person is really pale, consider pain and this may be due to serious abdominal problems, infection, bleeding, migraine, heart attack or excessive stress.

“Vomiting can be a passing bother, but can be a serious signal to dangerous problems”

REPORTING AND MANAGING VOMITING

1. Please record and report all vomiting.
2. Please regard as serious and seek help for vomiting that is associated with the changes below.
 - change in temperature or temperature greater than 102°F.
 - changes in hydration (dry skin and mouth, less urine).
 - changes in comfort (pain or swelling of abdomen).
 - change in vomit (blood, coffee grounds).
 - change in behavior (withdrawal, agitation, headache, head injury).
 - change in medical condition (medication, blood sugar swings).
 - change in vomiting pattern (if repeated more than twice or over a period of 4 hours).

Please observe all persons who are vomiting. Give sips or drinks of fluids – little or often, until settled. Position the person to reduce the chance of aspiration and observe. Note behavior, comfort, time of vomiting, type of vomitus (substance vomited), signs of pain or infection and most particularly, the ability to get fluids into the person. If you cannot get fluids in, ask for advice.

Vomiting can be a passing bother, but can be a serious signal to dangerous problems. If we watch for and respond to significant associated changes, we can reduce the chance of the people we care for getting into big trouble.