

## **Vomiting Before Gymnastics Competition—Is this normal?**

By Karen Cogan, Sr. Sport Psychologist, US Olympic and Paralympic Committee

Gymnastics competition is a great opportunity to show what you've learned, but let's face it, it isn't always easy. You look forward to it for all the possibilities it holds and want to avoid it at the same time because of the stress and unpleasant parts.

Let's talk about one of the unpleasant parts....Vomiting before a meet.

You might think, 'Eww, why are we talking about this?' The answer is that it helps to talk about ALL parts of a sport, pleasant or not. If it happens to you, you will understand why it matters.

Every athlete experiences some degree of nerves before competition. All athletes cope with nerves in their own way. Some athletes find the nerves make them feel nauseous, often to the point of vomiting. It is not uncommon, and you can find examples of well-known athletes talking about vomiting before competition in news articles (e.g. Mikaela Shiffrin, Larry Bird, Lionel Messi, David Beckham).

Why does it happen?

There are several reasons why you might feel nauseous before a meet. These include: eating the wrong food right before you compete (heavy or hard-to-digest), training too hard or in hot environments, and stress and anxiety. This handout will focus on nausea related to stress and anxiety. There are not many studies about anxiety and nausea, but there are several anecdotal stories and observations. We know it happens to the best of us--pre-competitive anxiety can cause nausea that leads to vomiting in some athletes.

How does it happen?

If you want to get really scientific, here's what happens. When under stress, the system that manages our fight or flight response (Sympathetic Nervous system) secretes corticotropin-releasing factor from the hypothalamus, which sends a signal to the stomach. Those signals alter the way the stomach processes food, often slowing that process and causing nausea. In cases of extreme anxiety, this nausea becomes so strong that vomiting occurs.

What should you do about it?

Vomiting is really unpleasant to you and those around you. Research shows that reducing stress and anxiety through relaxation interventions can lessen the severity of nausea. You can try relaxation

techniques such as deep breathing and mindfulness meditation. You can also consult with a sport psychologist or mental health professional to discuss your specific reactions to competition and stress and design a personalized plan for coping.

Vomiting before competition due to nerves is very different than vomiting regularly due to an eating disorder. If you, or anyone you know, is struggling with this, it's important to tell your parents, coach, or any trusted adult. The National Eating Disorders Association offers information and a hotline to contact for support.

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>