Nausea and Back Pain: Possible Causes and Treatments

by LUISITO BATONGBAKAL

Nausea and Back Pain

For people with no medical background, nausea and back pain may seem remotely connected to each other.

Our back is composed of muscles, ligaments, bones and joints that all keep us stable. On the other hand, nausea – described as the feeling that you need to throw up – is more than likely a symptom connected to the digestive system.

So, can back pain cause nausea?

The link between these two symptoms cannot be any clearer if you understand the concept of referred or radiating pain. For example, an impending heart attack is characterized by pain in the left chest that can travel to the left arm, jaw and even upper back.

In the case of nausea, whatever pain that is affecting the digestive system can radiate towards the back, making it difficult for the real cause to be diagnosed.

Common Causes of Nausea and Back Pain

While it is always better to consult a doctor than relying on your own judgment, this list of possible causes can help you know what to expect when back pain and nausea occur at the same time.

1. Heart Attack

Chest pain is the classic symptom of heart attack. But unknown to many, it can also be accompanied by nausea or vomiting, sweating, shortness of breath, fast heartbeat, lightheadedness and sharp pain that radiates to the abdomen, neck, jaw, shoulders and the upper back.

Always consider this as a medical emergency. Immediate attention from the physician can prevent irreversible disability or even death.

2. Biliary Colic and Acute Cholecystitis

Biliary colic is a gnawing pain typically felt at the upper abdomen just below the breastbone or at the right upper portion under the rib cage. It happens when a gallstone or tumor blocks the flow of bile from the gallbladder.

The bile is secreted by the body to help digest fats. It is made in the liver and then stored in the gallbladder before it can be released to the small intestine.

The problem arises when gallstones obstruct the flow. The bile duct where the bile passes through has to contract

vigorously to force the fluid out of it, resulting in pain that radiates to the upper back.

Biliary colic also includes digestive symptoms, like nausea and vomiting. It occurs following a large, fatty meal but the symptoms can sometimes show several hours after eating.

Compared to biliary colic, the abdominal pain associated with inflamed gallbladder – known as acute cholecystitis – can last for several hours. But the two share almost the same symptoms: sharp abdominal pain, fever, nausea or vomiting and pain that radiates to the back muscles.

Acute cholecystitis is relatively less common than other diseases. In fact, only 1% to 3% of people with gallstones develop it.

Anyone who experiences the above symptoms must seek medical attention immediately to prevent complications, like a perforated gallbladder.

3. Pregnancy

Hormonal changes in pregnant women may cause nausea and vomiting. Morning sickness can be considered healthy as long as it occurs during the first trimester.

Back pain is likewise not a cause for concern since the growing fetus naturally puts the mother's spine out of proper alignment. This pain may continue all throughout the pregnancy.

If the pregnant woman becomes nauseous after the first trimester, there is a great chance she is suffering from preeclampsia, a condition characterized by high blood pressure. Seek medical attention immediately to preserve the lives of both the mother and baby.

4. Appendicitis

The appendix is a pouch-shaped organ that protrudes from the large intestine and serves little to no purpose. It's mostly harmless but can cause considerable pain when infected with mucus or fecal matter.

The blockage causes the appendix to become inflamed. The swollen appendix irritates the abdominal wall (peritoneum), resulting in lower right abdominal pain.

For some people, their appendix is oriented towards the back of the colon, which causes back pain. Other symptoms associated with appendicitis include nausea and vomiting, fever, loss of appetite, constipation and diarrhea.

If not given immediate medical attention, the appendix can rupture within 48 hours and become life-threatening.

Other possible causes of nausea and back pain include menstrual cramps, pancreatitis, kidney stones, and kidney cysts.

When to Seek Medical Attention

Nausea and back pain may appear harmless if they occur separately. However, the presence of both symptoms along with others may suggest a more serious condition

As a rule of the thumb, if back pain and nausea continue after 24 hours or so (just like in the case of acute cholecystitis), immediate medical attention is required.

Also, pay attention to other symptoms that accompany nausea and back pain. The following are critical indicators of failing health and may require serious medical attention:

- Shortness of breath.
- Painful urination.
- Blood in the urine.
- Weakness/fatigue.
- Confusion.

Treatments Options

Medications that curb nausea and vomiting, like dolasetron, may be prescribed to pregnant women throughout their pregnancy.

As for back pain, both over-the-counter pain relievers and non-pharmacologic methods, like massage, work in most cases. Again, it all boils down to the cause of these symptoms.

For example, women with menstrual cramps can find relief from pain medications like acetaminophen and ibuprofen almost immediately. Resting and application of cold compress for the first 72 hours may also help.

Meanwhile, nausea can be relieved, especially among pregnant women, by avoiding solid foods and getting hydrated with a clear liquid diet.

You can also soothe your stomach by eating small, frequent meals throughout the day. Choose from bland foods like gelatin, clear broth and crackers.

Remember, this is just a summary of what to expect when you are experiencing both nausea and back pain all at the same time. Nothing can replace the meticulous process that a doctor uses to diagnose and treat what might be causing the symptoms accurately.