

Food Poisoning: important information

What causes food poisoning?

Germs in food and water can cause poisoning. They include:

- **Bacteria** - Salmonella, E.Coli and Campylobacter
- **Viruses** - Rotovirus or Norovirus
- **Parasites** - Cryptosporidium, Giardia and Amoebic dysentery

Also certain foods can create illnesses if they contain plant poisons (i.e. toadstools, foxglove), chemicals (i.e. toxins produced in some types of fish and seafoods), pesticides or products that cause allergies (i.e. nuts, seeds). Under the right conditions some bacteria can grow very rapidly simply by dividing in two every 20 to 30 minutes, so that one germ produces up to 16 million others within 8 hours! With some bacteria, chemicals (toxins) are produced which are not destroyed by cooking. A food does not have to look, smell or taste 'off' to be a danger to health.

If bacteria are eaten via infected food, they grow in and irritate the digestive tract (guts) causing symptoms such as diarrhoea or vomiting. Viruses cannot grow in food, but can survive and cause illness.

Not all infections of the gut (stomach and intestines) are caused by food poisoning. Germs passed on by other people, pets or farm animals cause more than half the cases. The infections are transferred via hands and surfaces, via the air if someone is vomiting, or from the toilet if someone has runny diarrhoea.

How does it happen?

The main reasons why food poisoning occurs are;

- ❖ not cooking food properly
- ❖ preparing food too far in advance
- ❖ ready to eat foods stored below raw foods in a fridge
- ❖ food stored at room temperature when it should be refrigerated
- ❖ food undercooked, or inadequately reheated
- ❖ cross-contamination in the kitchen
- ❖ infected people preparing or handling food

What germs are common?

Campylobacter - Found in the gut of animals and birds. Is the commonest cause of diarrhoea. The commonest meat source is poultry. Contaminated (spoilt) shellfish and mushrooms are fairly common sources along with infected pets. Storing food near raw meats or inadequate heat treatment usually causes food to be contaminated. Symptoms usually occur between 2 and 7 days.

Salmonella - The second most common cause of all reported cases of food poisoning. Symptoms usually develop within 12 and 36 hours. There is often pain, diarrhoea, fever and vomiting which can last for 6 days or more.

Escherichia coli (E. coli) - Found in the faeces (stools) and intestines of animals and man. It may indicate poor hygiene. Some strains such as E coli O157 can cause severe illness, kidney failure and death.

Staphylococcus aureus - Found on the skin, hair and mucous membranes, wounds, sores or septic spots. Can be passed to food by poor handling. Violent vomiting and diarrhoea can occur within 2 to 6 hours.

Listeria - This occasionally affects milk and dairy products, soft cheeses, pates meat products and vegetables. Can grow at refrigerator temperatures

Yeasts and Moulds - Yeasts and mould spoil foods and may cause illness from the toxins they produce. Some moulds in food may also cause cancer.

Faecal streptococci - Occur in the stools of man and other animals. Does not multiply in water, but is more resistant to water treatment and heat than E. coli and therefore can last longer.

Bacillus cereus - Common in soil. Foods such as rice, cereals and spices often contain this organism as can spoil milk & cream from cattle with teat infections. Produces spores that survive heat processing. Grows rapidly at room temperature producing toxins, both in the food and after it is eaten (ingestion).

Clostridium perfringens - Found in soil and the stools of most animals. The spores can survive in most conditions, including cooking and the organism is therefore found in some cold meats. Grows slowly below 15 °C and produces a toxin. This causes symptoms of abdominal pain, diarrhoea and nausea between 8 and 24 hours after infection.

Hepatitis A - This virus is found in stools of infected people and shellfish spoilt by sewerage. Symptoms usually start 1 - 36 hours after eating spoilt food and can last for up to one week. Symptoms may include abdominal pain, diarrhoea, vomiting, nausea, fever and yellowing of skin and eyes (jaundice).

How can I avoid it?

Germs can travel fast. Stop them by keeping raw foods away from cooked foods and wash anything that touches raw chicken or meat. Further tips to follow:

Cooked meat - Only buy it from shops where it is displayed and handled separately from raw meat.

Washing chicken - There's no need to wash raw chicken because any germs on it will be killed if cooked thoroughly. Washing it increases the danger of splashing germs around

Cook food thoroughly - Proper cooking kills many bacteria. Cook food right through, especially meat. Reheat until piping hot.

Store it safely - Keep perishable foods at a temperature below 5°C. Keep to the "USE By" date of wrapped foods and eat foods within 3 or 4 days of opening.

Keep your kitchen clean

Pets - Keep away from food, dishes and worktops

Handwashing - Washing your hands before and during food preparation is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of food poisoning bacteria.

What if I get food poisoning?

Contact your GP. You may be asked to provide a stool sample as soon as possible. In some cases an Environmental Health Officer may contact you. They will try to find out what led to your illness and offer advice about how to avoid infection in the future.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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