Foodborne Disease

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What is foodborne disease?

Foodborne disease (or food poisoning) results from consuming contaminated food or drink. It is very common, with an estimated 5.4 million cases per year in Australia.

Three main types of agents may cause illness from food:
- bacteria e.g., *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and *Listeria*
- viruses e.g., norovirus and hepatitis A
- toxins in food (either naturally occurring or introduced to a food, e.g. *Staphylococcus aureus* or *Bacillus cereus*).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms will vary, depending on the cause. They may include:
- diarrhoea
- vomiting
- nausea
- abdominal pain
- fever.

Other symptoms may include:
- headache
- jaundice
- numbness.

Symptoms can take between a few hours to a few days, or even longer, to develop and usually last for a few days, sometimes longer.

How is it spread?

Foodborne illness is mainly spread to humans when they eat poorly cooked food derived from infected animals (that is, meat, poultry, eggs, and their by-products). Spread by 'cross-contamination' occurs when germs contaminate ready-to-eat food: for example, when food that will not be cooked further is cut with a contaminated knife or via the hands of an infected food handler. Foodborne illness can spread from person-to-person via the hands of an infected person. It can also be spread from animals to humans.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can get a foodborne disease. However some people are at increased risk of serious illness. These include:
- infants
- elderly
- people with suppressed immune systems
- pregnant women.
How is it prevented?

Hygiene
Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and running water for at least 10 seconds and dry them with a clean towel after using the toilet, changing nappies, and before eating or preparing food. People with symptoms of foodborne disease should not prepare food for others. People who have symptoms of foodborne disease and work as food handlers or who care for patients, children or the elderly should not work for 48 hours after symptoms have resolved.

Temperature control
Poor food storage can allow bacteria to grow. Refrigerated food should be kept at less than 5 degrees Celsius. Hot foods should be kept hot at above 60 degrees Celsius. Reheated foods should be quickly reheated until all parts of the food are steaming hot. Thawing frozen foods should be done in a fridge or microwave. The longer you leave food at room temperature the more bacteria can multiply.

Food contamination
To prevent the contamination of food:

- store raw foods (such as meat) in sealed containers in the bottom of the fridge or freezer to prevent any fluid dripping or spilling onto other ready-to-eat food. Cover all foods in the refrigerator and freezer to protect them from contamination
- wash hands immediately after going to the toilet or handling raw foods and before handling cooked or ready-to-eat food
- use different chopping boards, trays, utensils and plates when preparing raw foods and ready-to-eat food. If you have only one chopping board wash it well in hot soapy water before reuse
- thoroughly wash all dirt off any raw vegetables and fruits before preparing and eating them
- dry dishes with a different cloth to that used for wiping hands or bench tops; wash dish cloths regularly.

How is it diagnosed?
A diagnosis of foodborne illness is based on a person’s symptoms. Laboratory confirmation is important during outbreaks and includes testing faecal samples.

How is it treated?
Many people have mild symptoms and will soon recover. People with diarrhoea and vomiting should stay home from work or school and drink plenty of fluids. People at risk of dehydration such as infants and the elderly should see their local doctor early. Antibiotics are not usually required except in complicated cases.

What is the public health response?
Doctors are required to notify suspected foodborne outbreaks to the local public health unit. Members of the public are advised to report food complaints to the NSW Food Authority’s telephone hotline on 1300 552 406.

Laboratories are required to notify some foodborne infections to the local public health unit. The public health units investigate clusters of cases to try and identify common links. Where a common food is implicated the NSW Food Authority will undertake a further environmental investigation and initiate control measures.

Statistics on cases are used to help develop prevention strategies.

For more information

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055 or visit the New South Wales Health website  [www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au)