

What is food poisoning?

Food poisoning is an illness caused by eating contaminated food.

In most cases, the food is contaminated by bacteria, such as *Salmonella* or *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*), or a virus, such as norovirus.

The symptoms usually begin 1–3 days after eating food and can include feeling sick, vomiting, diarrhoea, fever and stomach cramps.

Sometimes food poisoning can be caused by a toxin in the food. In these cases, the predominant symptom is vomiting.

How do you get infected with food poisoning?

You can become infected through eating contaminated food. Food can become contaminated at any stage during its production, processing or cooking.

For example, you can get food poisoning by:

- not cooking food thoroughly (particularly poultry, pork, burgers, sausages and kebabs);
- not correctly storing food that needs to be chilled at below 5°C;
- eating food that has been touched by someone who is ill with diarrhoea and vomiting;
- cross-contamination (the spread of bacteria, such as *E. coli*, from contaminated foods).

How can you avoid getting infected with food poisoning?

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water:

- before preparing and eating food;
- after handling raw food;
- after going to the toilet or changing a baby's nappy;
- after contact with pets and other animals especially during farm visits;
- after working in the garden.

Always wash raw fruit and vegetables before eating.

You should never handle food if:

- you are ill with stomach problems, such as diarrhoea or vomiting;
- you have damaged skin or sores caused by injury or disease (eg boils and septic cuts) unless the infected area is completely covered (eg by a waterproof dressing).

The best way to avoid getting food poisoning is to ensure you maintain high standards of food hygiene when storing, handling and preparing food.

How can you maintain high standards of hygiene when storing, handling or preparing food?

Take chilled and frozen foods home quickly – then put into the refrigerator or freezer at once.

Keep cooked food away from raw food. Store raw foods below cooked or ready-to-eat foods in the fridge to prevent contamination.

Cook food thoroughly, especially meat, so that it is piping hot. Follow cooking instructions on the pack.

If you reheat food, make sure it is piping hot all the way through. Only reheat food once.

Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Don't just leave these foods sitting at room temperature.

Keep your refrigerator at 0–5°C Centigrade. Get a thermometer to check temperatures inside the refrigerator.

Check 'use by' dates on food, and use foods within the recommended date on the pack.

Keep pets away from food, dishes and worktops.

Wash hands thoroughly before preparing and eating food and after handling raw food.

Keep all kitchen surfaces and equipment, including knives, chopping boards and dish cloths clean. Wash worktops and utensils between handling raw and cooked foods.

How can you prevent others in your household becoming infected?

Everyone in the house should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after going to the toilet and after handling soiled clothing or bedding and before preparing/eating food.

Wash the infected person's laundry separately and on the hottest cycle of the washing machine for that particular fabric.

Clean toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins after use with

detergent and hot water, followed by a household disinfectant.

Everyone in the house should have their own towel and they should not use anyone else's.

The infected person should not prepare or serve food for others.

What are the symptoms of food poisoning and how long do they last?

The most common symptoms are nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Other symptoms can include stomach pains and cramps, fever, loss of appetite and muscle pain.

Symptoms usually develop 1–3 days after eating contaminated food. However, depending on the type of food poisoning, symptoms can develop between one hour and several weeks after eating contaminated food. Most cases resolve within 12–48 hours.

How is food poisoning treated?

There is no specific treatment for food poisoning. Most people make a full recovery without any specific treatment.

During this time it is important to drink plenty of fluids as diarrhoea or vomiting can lead to dehydration and you can lose important sugars and minerals from your body.

If you feel sick and have difficulty keeping fluids down try taking small sips of fluid frequently. Avoid tea, coffee, carbonated drinks or alcohol. Always dilute sugary drinks even if you would not normally dilute them.

Do you need to see your GP?

If you need advice on the treatment of food poisoning you should discuss this with your GP.

Always contact your GP if any of the following apply:

- your symptoms are severe or do not improve after a few days;
- you have a high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over;
- you have symptoms of severe dehydration, such as sunken eyes and passing small quantities of dark, strong smelling urine;
- you have a baby with symptoms;
- you are pregnant.

Do you need to stay off work or school?

Yes. While you are ill and have symptoms you are infectious to other people. In most cases, you can return to work or school once you have been free from diarrhoea for 48 hours.

You should tell your employer you have had food poisoning if you work with vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the young, those in poor health, or if you handle food.

Children should not attend school/childcare or play with other children. In most cases, they can return to school/childcare when they are fully recovered and symptom free for 48 hours.

Certain types of food poisoning require specific testing to be carried out before you can return to work/school/childcare (eg a stool sample). You will be told if this applies to you and the arrangements for testing will be explained.



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02/16