

Factsheet 56: Food Safety

Campylobacter

Campylobacter is the commonest reported bacterial cause of infectious intestinal disease in England and Wales. Two species account for the majority of infections: *C. jejuni* and *C. coli*. Illness is characterised by severe diarrhoea and abdominal pain. Undercooked meat (especially poultry) is often associated with illness, as is unpasteurised milk and untreated water. The majority of infections, however, remain unexplained by recognised risk factors for disease.

Incubation period

1 to 11 days (usually 2 to 5 days).

Common clinical features

Abdominal pain, lots of diarrhoea, feeling generally ill (malaise); vomiting is uncommon.

Reservoir

Gastrointestinal tract of birds (particularly poultry) and animals, cattle and domestic pets.

Transmission

Raw or undercooked meat (especially poultry), unpasteurised milk, bird-pecked milk on doorsteps, untreated water and domestic pets with diarrhoea. Faecal oral transmission. This means hands become contaminated during a visit to the toilet, and subsequent hand washing is insufficient. At some later point, there is hand to mouth contact allowing the illness to spread. This contact may be direct, or could be via a vehicle such as the toilet door handle, toilet flush, sink taps and so on.

Other relevant features

The infective dose is relatively low but campylobacter does not multiply in food; food borne outbreaks are rare. Large outbreaks have been caused by raw and inadequately pasteurised milk and contaminated water supplies. Occupational exposure when processing poultry in abattoirs may be implicated in some cases.