

FACTSHEET 13 – Food Poisoning

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What Is Food Poisoning?

Food poisoning is an illness that occurs after eating or drinking anything that is contaminated. Usually, it is bacteria (germs) on the food that cause illness but sometimes, it can be chemicals, viruses, or parasites.

What Are The Symptoms?

The symptoms depend on what caused the illness but diarrhoea, sickness, stomach pains and sometimes high temperature/fever are the most common. Illness may last for only a day or continue for one or two weeks.

How Is Food Poisoning Caught?

- By eating raw or undercooked food, or food that has been in contact with and contaminated by these types of foods.
- By placing unwashed contaminated hands near or into the mouth.
- By swallowing bacteria passed on from someone who is already ill with symptoms of diarrhoea and vomiting.

Who Can It Affect?

ANYONE. However, the very young and the elderly are particularly vulnerable.

What To Do If You Or A Member Of Your Household Has Food Poisoning

- Ensure you and all household members wash their hands thoroughly with warm water and soap and dry thoroughly;
 - after using or cleaning the toilet;
 - after attending to another person who has diarrhoea/vomiting;
 - after changing a baby's nappy;
 - after handling or washing soiled clothes and bedding;
 - before eating or preparing food;
- Where possible, do not prepare food for your family or anyone else.
- Ensure each person affected has their own towel for drying hands.
- Ensure young children are supervised when washing hands, or have their hands washed for them.
- Keep soiled washing separate from the rest of the washing.
- Wash soiled clothes, bedding and towels separately on a hot cycle of the washing machine and clean the outer surfaces of the machine after loading.
- Clean toilet seats, flush handles, basins and taps more frequently than normal with hot soapy water. The toilet bowl should be cleaned with a toilet brush and disinfectant. Wear rubber gloves to clean the toilet and keep them for this purpose only.
- If you are using a disinfectant, ensure that it conforms to a British Standard and follow the manufacturer's instructions. *Keep all chemical cleaning agents in a safe place away from children.*
- Where possible, stay away from other people until your symptoms have stopped, especially vulnerable people like the elderly and very young.

How Do I Avoid Catching It?

Good food hygiene – the "4 Cs"

1. Cleaning

Hand washing with anti-bacterial soap and by keeping work surfaces and utensils clean and disinfecting them with anti-bacterial spray.

Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water and dry with disposable paper or a clean cotton towel:

- before preparing and eating food;
- after going to the toilet;
- after changing a baby's nappy;
- after contact with pets and animals;
- after handling raw food;

2. Cooking

Thorough cooking kills food poisoning bacteria. Make sure food (especially meat) is cooked right through and piping hot in the middle and don't re-heat food more than once.

3. Chilling

Bacteria stop growing or forming toxins at low temperatures:

- read storage labels carefully and follow the instructions;
- cool any leftover food quickly and then put it in the fridge within one and a half hours and store it there until reuse;

4. Cross Contamination (Where bacteria are passed from one surface to another)

This can be direct, for example, if blood drips from raw meat onto a sandwich, or indirectly by the use of unwashed hands, equipment, work surfaces or utensils. To prevent this:

- wash hands thoroughly before and after touching raw food;
- keep raw and ready to eat foods apart;
- store raw meat in sealed containers at the bottom of the fridge;
- use different boards for raw and ready to eat foods;
- clean all knives and /or other kitchen equipment and surfaces meticulously after use with hot soapy water and dry thoroughly;

How Can I Tell If Food Is Contaminated? You can't – even food which looks and tastes good can cause food poisoning.

Having A party?

- Ensure that anyone with diarrhoea/vomiting/nausea, does not prepare food.
- Do not prepare food too far in advance. Keep the food either piping hot, or refrigerated until it is served.
- Keep the menu simple. The more dishes you prepare, the more likely things are to go wrong.
- If you are giving food to a large number of guests, it is best to use commercial caterers, they have the equipment to prepare and store large amounts of food safely.

Do You Need To Stay Off Work Or School?

- Yes, until you have been completely free from any symptoms for 48 hours.
- Children should not play with other children and must not attend school or nursery until they are fully recovered and have been symptom free for 48 hours. *This is very important as a symptomatic child can infect other children.*
- If you work with young children, or as a food handler, or in healthcare, you must inform your employer and/or seek advice from your local Environmental Health Department. You may be asked to provide a faeces/stool specimen.