



Food Poisoning

Environmental Health Guide

What is Food Poisoning?

Food poisoning is any illness caused by eating food. Heavy metals, viruses and chemical toxin can all cause food poisoning symptoms. However, the main cause of food poisoning is Pathogenic bacteria.

Not all bacteria are harmful: many types normally live in the gut and some are used to make foods such as cheese yogurt and beer. Bacteria capable of causing serious illness grow best at body temperature around 37°C but can grow at temperatures between 5°C and 60°C. This temperature range is known as the 'temperature danger zone'.

Symptoms of Food Poisoning

The symptoms of food poisoning depend on the bacteria causing the illness. Some or all of the following symptoms are associated with food poisoning:

- nausea
- diarrhoea
- vomiting
- stomach pains, cramps
- sweating/fever/chills
- headache
- lethargy

Vomiting and diarrhoea can lead to dehydration and possibly death. Dehydration is especially dangerous for infants and the elderly.

Pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems (eg people receiving cancer treatment) need to be particularly careful when choosing and preparing food as Listeria infection can result in miscarriage, stillbirth and other serious illnesses. (For more information see Listeria Infection pamphlet.)

The time between eating contaminated food and the start of symptoms is called the incubation period and varies depending on the bacteria causing the disease, the amount of organisms consumed and the person's health. The incubation period and symptoms of some common food poisoning bacteria are described below and overleaf.

To Protect your Food

Bacteria cannot move on their own - they must be carried from one place to another. Bacteria are spread by poor food handling practices or by contact with pets, flies or other pests. To protect your food:

- Keep high-risk food out of the **temperature danger zone**
- Always store hot foods above 60°C and cold foods below 5°C
- When reheating food, heat right through until steaming hot
- Cook food thoroughly
- Cool food rapidly. If volume is greater than 3 litres then place the food in small containers to speed cooling.
- Store cooked and raw food separately
- Wash and dry your hands before and after handling food



Types of Food Poisoning

Salmonella	
Origins	Bowel, intestine of humans and animals (especially chickens), raw foods, untreated water
Onset	12 to 48 hours.
Symptoms	Nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, fever and headache for 3-21 days.

Staphylococcus aureus (Toxin)	
Origins	Skin, nose, saliva, bowel of humans.
Onset	1-8 hours.
Symptoms	Diarrhoea, stomach cramps, nausea and vomiting. Last for about 24 hours.

Clostridium perfringens	
Origins	Soil, bowel, intestine of humans and animals.
Onset	8-12 hours.
Symptoms	Stomach pains, diarrhoea and sometimes nausea and vomiting. Last for about 24 hours.

Vibrio parahaemolyticus	
Origins	Drinking water, shellfish and fish.
Onset	12-24 hours.
Symptoms	Diarrhoea, stomach cramps, sometimes nausea and vomiting. May last for several days.

Listeria monocytogenes	
Origins	Soil, bowel, intestine of humans and animals, raw vegetables, processed foods
Onset	2 days to 3 months.
Symptoms	Flu-like symptoms: fever, headaches and pains. May cause miscarriage and stillbirth, meningitis and septicaemia.

Campylobacter	
Origins	Raw poultry, raw meats, untreated water, unpasteurised milk and puppies, kittens, wild animals and birds.
Onset	2-5 days.
Symptoms	Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, vomiting, fever and nausea. Last for 2-5 days.



What Should I Do?

If you have any of the symptoms of food poisoning:

- Consult your family doctor and request analysis of stool specimens.
- Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- Report your illness to your local government Environmental Health Officer. Prompt investigation may prevent other people from being infected.
- Refrigerate any foods suspected of having caused the illness. They may be needed for further analysis to determine what caused your illness.
- As far as possible do not handle or prepare food while you have symptoms.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap (preferably liquid type) and warm water and dry with a paper towel before handling food.
- **If you work in the food industry notify your employer, it's the law and do not work until you have been symptom free for 48 hours.**

Further Information

For further information contact your Local Government Environmental Health Officer

or

Environmental Health Directorate
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