

Foodborne Disease

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, viruses, and toxins in food (either naturally occurring or introduced to a food).

Food poisoning can occur with any food, whether it is manufactured or prepared at home, at school, at the local supermarket, takeaway outlet, or restaurant. The risk of food poisoning can be reduced if the food is properly stored and prepared.

What are the causes and symptoms of foodborne disease?

Several different diseases with different symptoms can result from eating contaminated food.

Common causes are:

- bacteria, for example Salmonella, Campylobacter and Listeria ;
- viruses, for example Norovirus and hepatitis A;
- toxins, for example toxins made by bacteria such as Staphylococcus aureus or Bacillus cereus, and ciguatoxin.

Symptoms will vary, depending on the cause. They may include: diarrhoea, vomiting, nausea, abdominal pain, and fever. Other symptoms may include headache, jaundice, and 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.

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 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.

How can it be prevented?

Hygiene

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and running water for at least 15 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.

Temperature control

Storing food at incorrect temperatures can result in the multiplication of bacteria that cause food-poisoning, which grow between temperatures of 5°C and 60°C. As a precaution:

- refrigerators should not be higher than 5°C and should have adequate air flow around food to ensure even temperature distribution;
- hot foods should be kept above 60°C;
- reheated foods should be quickly reheated until all parts of the food reach 75°C;
- frozen food should be thawed in either the refrigerator or the microwave. The longer raw food is left at room temperature the more quickly bacteria multiply and toxins may form;
- to kill germs inside food, it must be thoroughly cooked.

Storage

Raw meat, fish, poultry, and raw vegetables can contain large numbers of bacteria, and can cross-contaminate ready-to-eat food if they are not stored or handled carefully. As a precaution:

- raw foods should be stored covered or in sealed containers below other ready-to-eat foods to prevent food parts and meat juice spilling or dripping on to the other food;
- foods should be covered before storage in the refrigerator, freezer, and cupboards to protect them from contamination;
- hands should be washed immediately after handling raw foods and before handling cooked or ready to eat food;
- different chopping boards, utensils, and plates should be used for raw foods and ready-to-eat food. If the same chopping board is being used, it should be washed well in hot soapy water before re-use;
- thoroughly wash raw vegetables before preparation and eating;
- food items should be stored carefully away from toxic chemicals, insect sprays, cleaning agents, etc;
- cloth towels used for drying dishes are not to be used for wiping of hands or bench tops. These should be washed and dried regularly;
- dish cloths should be sanitised regularly or replaced.

If in doubt about the quality or safety of a particular food, the old saying applies, 'If in doubt, throw it out'.

Further information - Public Health Units in NSW



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www.health.nsw.gov.au