



Food Poisoning

What is food poisoning?

Food poisoning is caused by eating food or drink that is contaminated with food poisoning organisms including certain types of bacteria (known as pathogenic bacteria), parasites, viruses or toxins.

What are the symptoms of food poisoning?

People with food poisoning may experience some or all of the following symptoms:

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

The symptoms of food poisoning may vary depending on the cause of the illness. 'Table One – Types of Food Poisoning' at the end of this fact sheet lists common food poisoning organisms and their associated symptoms.

Symptoms can vary from mild to severe. Some people are more at risk of getting food poisoning than others. These vulnerable groups include the elderly, young children, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems.

The symptoms of food poisoning are often the same as the symptoms of gastroenteritis

(gastro) that is caught from sources other than food, such as from other people or from touching contaminated animals, surfaces and objects. The Department of Health fact sheet 'Gastroenteritis' will provide further information. This fact sheet is available on the Public Health website www.public.health.wa.gov.au

Medical attention should be sought for the diagnosis of food poisoning.

What to do if you suspect you have food poisoning

- Consult your doctor, especially if you have severe symptoms. It is particularly important for vulnerable people such as the elderly or young children to have immediate medical attention.
- Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration. Dehydration is especially dangerous for infants and the elderly.
- As far as possible do not handle or prepare food while you have symptoms. This will prevent you from infecting others.
- If you must handle food, wash your hands with soap and warm water and dry thoroughly before handling food to prevent cross-contamination.
- If you work in food handling you must tell your employer and you must not handle food at work until you have been symptom-free for 48 hours. This is the law.





Investigating the cause of your illness

Prompt investigation into the cause of your illness may prevent other people from becoming ill.

- Report your illness to the environmental health officer at the local government authority where you purchased the food. Local government contact details are available on the Public Health website at www.public.health.wa.gov.au
- Refrigerate any foods that you think may have made you ill. They may be needed for further analysis to determine what caused your illness.
- Consult your doctor and ask for an analysis of stool specimens. This may help in investigating the cause of your illness.

How does food become contaminated?

Food poisoning organisms can be spread and/or can develop to unsafe levels in the following circumstances:

- when poor food handling practices are followed, including lack of hand washing
- when food is touched by someone who has gastroenteritis
- by contact with pets, flies or other pests
- cross contamination between raw meat and ready to eat foods
- as a result of poor temperature control

How to protect your food

- Keep food covered to protect it from contamination (for example by dust, insects or sneezing).
- Keep raw food separate from cooked foods to prevent cross-contamination. For example, keep raw meats in a sealed container and on a separate shelf to ready-to-eat foods in the fridge.
- Keep high-risk foods hot (above 60°C) or cold (below 5°C). Pathogenic bacteria grow best at temperatures between 5°C and 60°C.
- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before handling food.
- Use separate cutting boards and knives for each type of food (for example raw meat, fish, vegetables and cooked meat). Always clean and sanitise work surfaces and utensils to kill organisms.
- Most food should be cooked to a temperature of at least 75°C. This can be checked with a thermometer. If you do not have one then check that meat is cooked until the juices run clear, not pink.
- Avoid handling food when you think you may have food poisoning.

The Department of Health fact sheet 'Food Safety for Consumers' will provide further information on good food handling techniques. This fact sheet is available on the Public Health website www.public.health.wa.gov.au





Table one: Types of food poisoning

The following table details the symptoms and incubation period for some of the more common types of food poisoning organisms. The associated foods shown in the table have previously been found to be a source of that food poisoning organism. This does not mean that food poisoning organisms are always found in these foods or that they are always unsafe to eat. This table is for guidance only and medical attention should be sought for the diagnosis of food poisoning.

Pathogen	Incubation period	Symptoms	Associated foods
<i>Salmonella</i>	8 – 72 hours (usually 12 – 36 hours)	Abdominal pain, nausea, diarrhoea, fever, vomiting and headache.	Raw chicken and meat, undercooked eggs, raw egg mayonnaise
<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>	1 – 6 hours	Nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and diarrhoea. Last for about 1 – 3 days.	Raw meat and poultry, cheese, cream, unpasteurised milk, processed meat
<i>Clostridium perfringens</i>	8 – 22 hours	Diarrhoea, abdominal cramps that last for about 24 hours.	Meat, poultry
<i>Vibrio parahaemolyticus</i>	4 – 30 hours	Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting. May last several days.	Raw or undercooked fish and shellfish
<i>Listeria monocytogenes</i>	2 days to 3 months	Flu like symptoms: fever, headaches and pains. May cause miscarriage and stillbirth. Symptoms are most likely to occur in vulnerable groups.	Soft cheese, unpasteurised milk, ready-to-eat deli meats
<i>Campylobacter</i>	2 – 7 days	Diarrhoea, fever and abdominal pain. Last for about 5 days.	Raw poultry and meat, contaminated water, unpasteurised milk
<i>Escherichia coli</i>	2 – 8 days	Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, vomiting and fever.	Undercooked beef, unpasteurised milk, sprouts, contaminated water
<i>Bacillus cereus</i>	1 – 5 hours (vomiting) 10 – 13 hours (diarrhoea)	Nausea, vomiting Diarrhoea	Cooked rice, meat products, custards

Further information

Contact your doctor if you are unwell.

To report a possible case of food poisoning contact the environmental health officer at the local government authority where you purchased the food.

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