

SEPTEMBER:

FOOD SAFETY

An estimated 76 million cases of foodborne disease – “food poisoning” – occur each year in the United States. The majority of these cases are mild and cause symptoms for only a day or two. But some are more serious...

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates there are 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths related to foodborne disease each year. The most severe cases tend to occur in the very old, the very young, those who already have an illness that reduces their immune system function, and even healthy people exposed to a very large dose of the germ or chemical in contaminated food or beverage. (That's right – not all food-related illnesses are caused by germs... think about poisonous mushrooms or fish that produce toxins...)

WHAT IS FOOD POISONING?

“Food poisoning” is an illness caused by consuming foods or beverages that are contaminated with germs or other harmful substances. Most cases involve germs – bacteria, viruses or parasites – which may be found in raw meat, chicken, fish and eggs, but can be transferred to any type of food. They can also grow on food that is left at room temperature (or on a sunny picnic table) or even refrigerated foods that have been stored too long before they're eaten. Sometimes food is contaminated by people who have not washed their hands before they handle or prepare food.

It's very easy to blame the last restaurant where we've eaten, but most cases of food poisoning originate in our own homes, and the incubation period (time from eating or drinking the contaminated food until symptoms develop) may be anywhere from hours to months!

Most of the time, food poisoning is mild and the symptoms are gone in a day or two. But some types of food poisoning are more serious (even deadly) and require medical treatment.

HOW DO HARMFUL GERMS GET INTO FOOD?

There are several possible ways that food may become contaminated –

- During meat processing: bacteria which are normal in the intestines of healthy animals may be spread to those parts of the animal that we eat.
- Water or washing: if the water used to irrigate or wash fresh fruits or vegetables has germs in it, those germs get on the fruits and vegetables.
- When food is prepared: if someone who has germs on his hands touches food, or if the food touches other food that has germs on it, the germs can spread – e.g., if you use the same cutting board or knife for chopping vegetables after you trimmed or cut raw meat, the germs from the meat can be transferred to the vegetables.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF FOOD POISONING?

How you feel when you get food poisoning depends on how healthy you are and what is making you sick. The first

symptom is often diarrhea, but you may also experience fever, chills, weakness, vomiting, stomach pain, headaches and muscle aches, or (with the hepatitis virus) jaundice (yellow skin and eyes) and/or dark urine. Botulism food poisoning is caused by a germ that produces a toxin which can damage nerves, resulting in symptoms such as double vision, droopy eyelids, trouble speaking, swallowing or breathing, and paralysis.



HOW CAN I PREVENT FOOD POISONING?

Fortunately, you have a lot of help from agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the National Marine Fisheries Service, and other regulatory agencies. But the job of food safety begins and ends with you...

- Begin by buying good foods: don't accept dented or rusted cans, damaged packaging, cracked eggs or food that looks or smells spoiled
- Shop for items that require refrigeration or freezing after you've gathered the other items on your shopping list, to avoid extended time at room temperatures; then, take them home immediately – don't run other errands, leaving food in a warm car!
- Refrigerate or freeze poultry and other meats as soon as you bring them home from the store: refrigerate at 40°F or less) and keep meat or poultry juices from spilling onto other foods by wrapping carefully and placing on lower shelves
- Start CLEAN: wash your hands often and always before you touch food; keep knives, cutting boards and counters clean; always wash fresh fruits and vegetables before use
- SEPARATE: keep germs on raw meats from getting onto fruits, vegetables and other foods; put cooked meat on a clean platter, not back on the plate that held the meat while it was raw!
- COOK: make sure that meat, fish, and chicken are fully cooked – “until juices run clear, not pink” is the rule; eggs should be fully cooked, too; cooked foods should be kept hot (140°F) and served within 30 minutes of cooking
- CHILL: refrigerate leftovers right away; don't leave cut fruits and vegetables at room temperature for more than two hours; keep all foods with cream, custard or meringue refrigerated until they're about to be served – unserved portions must go back in the ‘fridge immediately!
- Since microwave ovens are known to cook unevenly, only use your microwave to reheat foods that have been thoroughly cooked by conventional methods
- WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!!

For more information, go to vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/ ,

www.webmd.com/food-recipes/food-poisoning-and-safe-food
www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/foodborneinfections

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