

Food Poisoning

Food poisoning is an illness caused by eating contaminated food. The most common sources of contamination are bacteria or toxic substances produced by bacteria. Some viruses and fungi can also cause food poisoning.

Typical symptoms are a sudden onset of nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhoea. The illness usually lasts from less than 24 hours to several days depending on the cause. Occasional severe cases last longer and may require hospitalisation. While single cases of food poisoning undoubtedly occur, they are difficult to detect and frequently go unreported. Food poisoning is usually recognised as a typical illness occurring in a group of people shortly after eating a common food.

Detection of large numbers of certain bacteria in suspect food samples and detection of the same bacteria in samples of faeces from affected people confirm the diagnosis of food poisoning.

Bacteria may contaminate food as a result of farming or other production methods, poor preparation, handling or storage of food. Contaminated food may not look, smell or taste any different from food that is safe.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

Varies depending on the cause, but usually from a few hours to a few days. Although many ill people blame a food they ate before they got ill, experience indicates that this food is usually not the cause of the illness.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Depends on what has caused the illness. Not all causes of food poisoning are able to be spread from person-to-person, but some are.

Treatment

Treatment varies depending on what is the cause of the food poisoning. Usually these illnesses do not require antibiotic treatment.

Control of spread

- > If the cause is not known, it should be assumed that it may be possible to spread from person-to-person, or for an infected person to contaminate food and indirectly infect others. Therefore:
 - Follow good hand washing and keeping areas clean procedures
 - Exclude from child care, preschool, school or work until there has been no diarrhoea or vomiting for 24 hours. If working in a child care, health care or commercial food setting, the exclusion period should be 48 hours
 - Good food handling procedures should always be followed
 - People who have diarrhoea should not use public swimming pools until there has been no diarrhoea for at least 24 hours.



Food poisoning is a notifiable disease

- > Hand Hygiene
- > Keeping Areas Clean
- > Preventing Food Poisoning at Home
- > Collecting a Faecal Sample