

Foodborne Disease

What is foodborne disease?

Foodborne disease is a common cause of illness, with an estimated 4.1 million cases per year in Australia. It is caused by the consumption of contaminated food.

There are many different agents that can contaminate food and cause illness. These include bacteria (e.g. *Salmonella* or *Campylobacter*), viruses (e.g. norovirus or hepatitis A), and toxins in food (e.g. *Staphylococcus aureus* or *Bacillus cereus*).

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of foodborne disease vary depending on the agent causing illness. Symptoms may include diarrhoea, vomiting, nausea, abdominal pain, and fever.

Symptoms can take anywhere between a few hours, a few days, or even several weeks to develop. Symptoms usually only last for a few days, but can last longer. Dehydration can be a complication in young children and the elderly.

How is foodborne disease spread?

There are a number of opportunities for food to become contaminated as it is produced, processed, prepared and handled.

Usually people are infected after eating inadequately cooked food or by cross-contamination. Agents that cause foodborne disease can also be spread directly from animals to humans or from person-to-person.

Inadequate cooking

Foodborne disease can be spread from eating poorly cooked foods. Raw or undercooked eggs, meat and poultry are particularly high risk foods.

Cross contamination

Cross contamination occurs when germs are spread to food from other food, surfaces, hands or equipment.

Who is at risk of infection?

Anyone can be infected but some people are more susceptible. These include infants, elderly, people with suppressed immune systems and pregnant women.



How is it diagnosed?

Foodborne disease is usually diagnosed based on a person's symptoms, although laboratory confirmation from testing faecal samples is important during outbreaks.

What treatment is available?

Most people usually recover with rest and extra fluids. Antibiotics are not usually required but may be recommended by doctors in some cases.

Should I be at work or school?

People with diarrhoea and vomiting should stay home from work or school.

People working as food handlers, in childcare, with the elderly or in health care settings should not return to work until 48 hours after their diarrhoea ceases.

Children who attend childcare should remain home until 24 hours after their diarrhoea ceases.

How is it prevented?

Hand washing

Hand washing is a very effective way of preventing cross contamination and person-to-person spread of foodborne disease agents. Hands should be washed with soap and running water for between 10 and 15 seconds:

- before preparing food;
- before handling raw and ready-to-eat food;
- before eating;
- after going to the toilet or changing nappies;
- after handling pets; and
- after working in the garden.

Safe food handling and storage

Adopting safe food handling and storage techniques can effectively prevent the spread of foodborne illness. Remember to follow these food safety rules:

- Keep food preparation areas and utensils clean.
- Use separate cutting boards and utensils when preparing raw foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- Thoroughly cook all raw food.



- Avoid using cracked or dirty eggs.
- In the fridge, keep raw foods on a lower shelf than ready-to-eat foods to avoid cross-contamination.
- Keep food below 5°C or above 60°C.
- Reheat food until it is steaming (internal temperature at least 75°C).
- Wash raw fruit and vegetables before eating them.
- Only defrost food in a fridge or by using a microwave.
- Dry dishes with a different dish cloth to that used for wiping hands or kitchen surfaces and wash dish cloths regularly.

Need more information?

For more information on foodborne diseases contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 5124 9213**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Several agents that cause foodborne disease are notifiable diseases. Cases notified to ACT Health are investigated by Public Health Officers.

Acknowledgements

Kirk M *et al.* Foodborne Illness, Australia, Circa 2000 and Circa 2010. *Emerg Infect Dis.* 2014 Nov [cited Dec 2015]. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid2011.131315>.

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