

FOODBORNE ILLNESS

What is a foodborne illness?

A foodborne illness (sometimes called “food poisoning”) occurs when one or more persons become ill from consuming contaminated food or beverages. Bacteria or its toxins usually cause foodborne illness, but parasites, viruses, and chemicals are other causes. Contamination occurs during cultivation, harvesting, handling, storage, and transportation or preparation of foods.

What are the symptoms of foodborne illness?

Symptoms may include nausea, prolonged vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pains, bloody stools (feces), and a fever.

Who is at risk?

Individuals of all ages are at risk of foodborne illness. Each year in the United States, foodborne illnesses infect an estimated 48 million people, causing more than 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. The elderly, infants, pregnant women, and those with weakened immune systems are most susceptible to complications.

How are cases diagnosed?

Foodborne illnesses are diagnosed by testing samples of stool (feces).

What should I do if I suspect a foodborne illness?

If you or someone you know thinks they may have a foodborne illness:

- Seek medical attention. Ask the medical provider to take stool samples for testing.
- Report suspected foodborne illnesses to the Division of Public Health’s (DPH) Office of Food Protection Consumer Complaint Line: 302-744-4736. After regular working hours, call DPH’s 24-hour, toll-free response line at 1-888-295-5156.

Why is it important to report foodborne illnesses?

The Office of Food Protection can identify outbreaks when foodborne illnesses are reported. Using stool cultures and food samples, the Delaware Public Health Laboratory can isolate, type, fingerprint, and report bacteria causing the illness. Depending on the finding, the Office of Food Protection may investigate suspect food establishments.

When I call DPH, what will the Office of Food Protection ask me?

- What symptoms do you have? When did they begin?
- Are the symptoms directly related to a particular meal or food establishment (name and location)?
- Is anyone else ill? Did they eat the same food?
- What was eaten in the last three to five days?

Office of Food Protection
24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156

Revised: 10/2023

Page 1 of 2

How do I treat a suspected foodborne illness?

Drink plenty of liquids to avoid dehydration. Get plenty of rest.

What are the complications of foodborne illness?

Severe dehydration can lead to medical complications, kidney failure, and death. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a severe complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome can occur in 5% to 10% of *E. coli* 0157:H7 cases. This causes temporary anemia, profuse bleeding, and kidney failure. Infection with *Campylobacter*, bacteria that live in poultry, can lead to Guillain-Barré syndrome, and prolonged infection can stunt growth and development in children.

Can ill persons infect their families?

Persons with a foodborne illness may have the bacteria in their stools. Wash hands frequently and thoroughly, with soap and warm running water. Use proper hygiene to avoid infecting others. Follow these tips to reduce the chances of getting a foodborne illness:

- Keep food preparation areas and utensils clean.
- Do not consume items that do not look, smell, or taste right.
- Use separate utensils and cutting boards for meats.
- Wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Cook all meats and eggs thoroughly to kill bacteria.
- Refrigerate leftovers promptly. Do not leave food at room temperature for extended periods.
- Wash hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds before and after preparing food, and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, or touching animals.

How can I learn which food establishments have passed their inspections?

View food establishment inspection reports at www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/hsp/feir.html.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/

U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, www.fda.gov/food/

Gateway to Government Food Safety Information, www.foodsafety.gov

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety Information Center, fsis.usda.gov.

Office of Food Protection
24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156

Revised: 10/2023

Page 2 of 2