



## 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, 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?

All persons are at risk of foodborne illness. Each year in the United States, foodborne illnesses infect an estimated 48 million people. More than 128,000 persons are hospitalized and 3,000 people will die from foodborne illnesses. The elderly, infants, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems are more susceptible to complications.

### How are cases diagnosed?

Foodborne illnesses are diagnosed by testing stool samples.

### 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 your local health department:

**Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH)  
Office of Food Protection  
Consumer Complaint Line  
(302) 744-4736**

After regular working hours, the consumer should call DPH's 24-hour, toll-free response line at 1-888-295-5156.

### Why is it important to report foodborne illnesses?

DPH's Office of Food Protection can identify foodborne outbreaks earlier. Using stool cultures and food samples, the DPH Laboratory can isolate, type, fingerprint and report bacteria causing the illness. Depending on the finding, the DPH Office of Food Protection could investigate suspect food establishments.

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

DPH's Office of Food Protection will ask callers:

- What symptoms they have, and when they began;
- If they think it might be directly related to a particular meal or food establishment (name and location);
- If anyone else may be ill or ate the same food; and
- What was eaten in the last three to five days.

**How do I treat a suspected foodborne illness?**

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

**What are the complications?**

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.

**How can I 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?**

Delaware's Division of Public Health has a website where consumers can view inspection reports on food establishments at any time. Visit this website:

[www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/hsp/feir.html](http://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/hsp/feir.html).

**For more information:**

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/](http://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/)).
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition ([www.fda.gov/food/](http://www.fda.gov/food/)).
- Gateway to Government Food Safety Information ([www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov)).
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety Information Center ([fsrio.nal.usda.gov/](http://fsrio.nal.usda.gov/)).

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