



The Delaware Office of
WOMEN'S HEALTH

Foodborne Illness and Pregnancy

Congratulations on your pregnancy! Food safety should be important to everyone, but as a pregnant woman it is especially important for you to learn how to protect yourself and your unborn baby from foodborne illness. When you become pregnant, your body naturally undergoes hormonal changes, some of which also change your immune system, making you more susceptible to contracting a foodborne illness. The immune system is the body's natural reaction or response to "foreign invasion." The good news is that you can take special effort to select and prepare foods to prevent contracting these and other foodborne diseases.

Some foods are riskier for you than others. In general, the foods that are most likely to contain harmful bacteria or viruses fall into two categories: Uncooked fresh fruits and vegetables, and some animal products, such as unpasteurized (raw) milk; soft cheeses made with raw milk; and raw or undercooked eggs, raw meat, raw poultry, raw fish, raw shellfish and their juices; luncheon meats and deli-type salads (without added preservatives) prepared on site in a deli-type establishment. Interestingly, the risk these foods may actually pose depends on the origin or source of the food and how the food is processed, stored, and prepared.

All consumers need to follow the Four Basic Steps to Food Safety: Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill.

- Clean – wash hands and surfaces often
- Separate – separate raw meats from other foods
- Cook – Cook to the right temperature
- Chill – Refrigerate food promptly

When in doubt, throw it out!

Eating out can be lots of fun—so make it an enjoyable experience by following simple guidelines to avoid food-borne illness. Remember don't ever hesitate to ask questions before you order. Ask how a food is prepared. Also, let them know you don't want any food item containing raw meat, poultry, fish, sprouts, or eggs. Basic Rules for Ordering:

- Ask whether the food contains uncooked ingredients such as eggs, sprouts, meat, poultry, or seafood. If so, choose something else.
- Ask how these foods have been cooked. If the server does not know the answer, ask to speak to the chef to be sure your food has been cooked to a safe minimum internal temperature.
- If you plan to get a "doggy bag" or save leftovers to eat at a later time, refrigerate perishable foods as soon as possible—and always within 2 hours after purchase or delivery. If the leftover food is in air temperatures above 90 °F, refrigerate it within 1 hour.

If in doubt, make another selection!



A foodborne illness (sometimes called “food poisoning”) occurs when a person becomes 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. Symptoms may include nausea, prolonged vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pains, bloody stools (feces), and a fever. If you suspect you have a foodborne illness, follow these general guidelines:

1. Consult your doctor or a health care provider and seek medical treatment. As a pregnant woman, you are at increased risk for severe infection.

- Contact your doctor immediately if you develop symptoms or think you may be at risk.
- If you develop signs of infection, seek out medical advice and treatment immediately.

2. Preserve the food.

- If some of the suspect food is available, wrap it securely, label it to say “DANGER,” and freeze it.
- This food may be used in diagnosing your illness and in helping others from getting ill.

3. Save all the packaging materials, such as cans or cartons.

- Write down the food type, the date and time consumed, and when your symptoms started. Write down as many foods and beverages you can recall consuming in the past week (or longer), since the start time for various foodborne illnesses are different.
- Save any identical unopened products.
- If the suspect food is a USDA-inspected meat, poultry, or egg product, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854).

For all other foods, call the FDA Office of Emergency Operations at 1-866-300-4374 or 301-796-8240.

4. 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 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.

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.