

What You Need to Know About Food-borne Illness

Health Canada estimates that there are 11 to 13 million cases of food-borne illness, commonly known as food poisoning, in Canada every year. Most cases of food-borne illness can be prevented by using safe food handling practices.

What is food-borne illness?

Food-borne illness refers to any illness caused by consuming food or beverages that are contaminated with disease-causing bacteria, viruses and/or parasites. Poisonous chemicals and/or other harmful substances can also cause food-borne illness if they are present in food.

What are the symptoms of food-borne illness?

Many people have had food-borne illness and may not have known it, as they mistake these symptoms for the flu.

Symptoms can vary and include:

- diarrhea
- stomach cramps
- nausea
- vomiting
- fever
- headache

There is typically a delay from the time the contaminated food was consumed to the time symptoms appear. This delay can range from hours to days to over a month.

In most cases, the body is able to recover after a short period of acute discomfort and illness. However, food-borne illness can result in permanent health problems or even death, especially for people at high risk. These include babies, young children, pregnant women (and their fetuses), elderly people, sick people and others with weakened immune systems.

How is food-borne illness diagnosed?

Food-borne illness is usually diagnosed by specific laboratory tests that identify the source. Bacteria, viruses and parasites can be found in a laboratory either by culturing stool samples or by examining stools under the microscope.

A symptomatic person needs to submit a stool sample for a confirmed diagnosis to be made. Often, many ill people do not seek medical attention, and of those that do, many are not tested, so these cases of food-borne illness go undiagnosed. This is one reason the incidence of food-borne illness is greatly under reported.

How is food-borne illness treated?

People that suspect that they are suffering from food-borne illness should seek treatment from their doctor. There are many different kinds of food-borne illnesses and they may require different treatments, depending on the symptoms they cause.

What can people do to protect themselves from food-borne illness?

Follow the 4 simple steps of safe food handling to reduce the risk of food-borne illness:

Clean: wash hands and surfaces often

Separate: don't cross-contaminate

Cook: cook to a safe internal temperature

Chill: refrigerate promptly, cool quickly



Report suspected food-borne illnesses to your local health department. The local public health department is an important part of the food safety system. Often calls from concerned citizens are how outbreaks are first detected. If a public health official contacts you to find out more about an illness you had, your cooperation is important.

Are some people at higher risk?

Food-borne illness can be especially dangerous for young children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems. People in these categories should take extra care, as they are at a higher risk for severe infections such as *Listeriosis*. They should be particularly careful not to consume undercooked animal products and/or hazardous foods that have not been stored and prepared properly.



For more information on food safety at home, contact

York Region Health Connection at

1-800-361-5653 TTY: 1-866-252-9933

or visit **www.york.ca/foodsafety**

