

Food-Borne Illnesses

Food-borne illnesses (sometimes called **food poisoning**) are caused by eating foods contaminated with **pathogens** (disease-causing agents) such as viruses, parasites, bacteria, or fungi. Raw, unwashed, or undercooked foods are at greatest risk of being contaminated. However, most food-borne illnesses can be prevented if food is handled properly. Typical symptoms of food-borne illnesses include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and sometimes fever. Infants, the elderly, and people with diabetes, cancer, or AIDS are at an increased risk because their immune systems may not be functioning properly.

A severe complication of some types of food-borne illness is **hemolytic uremic syndrome**, a combination of **anemia** (low red blood cell count), profuse bleeding, and kidney failure. The September 10, 2003, issue of *JAMA* includes 2 articles about hemolytic uremic syndrome in persons aged 1 month to 18 years.

PREVENTING FOOD-BORNE ILLNESSES

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before and after handling food
- Wash raw vegetables and fruits with running water before eating
- Always clean surfaces like cutting boards that touch raw foods between each use
- Cook meat, poultry, and eggs thoroughly to an internal temperature of 160° F
- Refrigerate (40° F or below) or freeze (0° F or below) leftovers promptly
- Don't eat perishable foods (meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy foods) if they have been out of refrigeration for more than 2 hours

It is often difficult to distinguish a food-borne illness from other common causes of vomiting and diarrhea such as **viral gastroenteritis** (viral infection of the intestinal tract usually lasting a day or two). If several individuals get sick within a few hours of eating the same food, a food-borne illness should be considered. If you think you or a family member may have a food-borne illness, consult your doctor. If you think food contamination occurred at a restaurant or other food service facility, call your local health department to investigate.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
800/311-3435
www.cdc.gov
- US Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service
800/535-4555
www.fsis.usda.gov
- US Food and Drug Administration
888/INFO-FDA (888/463-6332)
www.fda.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and other Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on salmonella (a type of bacteria that can cause food-borne illness) was published in the May 5, 1999, issue, and one on seafood safety was published in the August 26, 1998, issue.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; US Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service; Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition; US Food and Drug Administration; Center for Food Safety and Technology

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