

FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS

What is food-borne illness?

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

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 symptoms for the flu. While symptoms can vary, they usually include:

- Diarrhea
- Stomach cramps
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fever
- Headache

There is typically a delay from the time 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 can 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 high-risk individuals including 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 through laboratory tests.

A symptomatic person needs to submit a stool sample to confirm a diagnosis. Often, many ill people do not seek medical attention, and of those that do, many are not tested, so many 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?

Your health care provider can recommend treatment options if you suspect that you are suffering from food-borne illness and are experiencing symptoms.

How to prevent the spread of food-borne illness

If you are experiencing symptoms of food poisoning:

- Avoid preparing or serving food while ill
- Maintain good hand hygiene, including hand washing after using sanitary facilities and before handling food

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1-877-464-9675

TTY 1-866-512-6228

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

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

- Clean:** Wash hands and surfaces often
- Separate:** Do not cross-contaminate
- Cook:** Cook to a safe internal temperature
- Chill:** Refrigerate promptly and cool quickly



Report suspected food-borne illnesses to your local health unit. The local public health unit is an important part of the food safety system. Calls from concerned residents often help detect outbreaks. If someone from public health contacts you to discuss a recent illness, your cooperation is important.

Are some people at higher risk of food-borne illness?

Food-borne illness can be especially dangerous for young children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems. People in these categories are at a higher risk for severe infections such as Listeriosis and 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: 1-866-512-6228 or visit york.ca/foodsafety