

Advice for persons suffering from suspected food poisoning or foodborne illness

Your questions answered



EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

What is food poisoning?

Food poisoning is an illness usually caused by consuming food or drink contaminated by bacteria or the poisons that they can produce.

Why has the Environmental Health Service contacted me?

We have a legal obligation to investigate cases of food poisoning and will advise you on any precautions that you may need to take. We will also investigate possible sources of contamination (e.g. suspect foods or linked food businesses) and try to ensure that no further cases occur.

We receive notifications from doctors if they suspect one of their patients is suffering from food poisoning. The Public Health Laboratory Service also informs us of all confirmed results of food poisoning on any samples they have tested.

Sometimes, if there has been illness reported amongst the guests at a function, we may be informed by the food business proprietor or by one of those who attended.

How can I be certain I have food poisoning?

The only way to be certain is for the cause of the illness to be detected in a sample of your faeces (usually diarrhoea) and / or sometimes in vomit. Occasionally for some more unusual food poisoning bacteria a sample of blood taken by your doctor may be tested.

Will it be possible to determine the cause?

It is very difficult to be certain about the precise cause of any illness, especially if there are only a few cases. This can only be done when exactly the same strain of the same food poisoning bacteria is found both in the suspect food and in a sample specimen you have provided.

However, with your co-operation, it is often possible to identify the most likely cause by using information you can provide:

- about what was eaten or drunk in the days leading up to your illness,
- about the timing and pattern of your symptoms,
- from the results on any specimens you have submitted, and
- from any remains of suspect food which we may have analysed.

Exclusion from work or school

All cases of food poisoning and gastroenteritis are regarded as potentially infectious. Sufferers should normally stay away from work or school until they are free from diarrhoea and vomiting (without medication) for at least 48 hours. Inform your

employer, child carer or school as soon as possible to help them identify if they may have an outbreak.

Certain groups pose an increased risk of spreading infection. If you belong to one of the following 'high risk' groups, additional precautions are needed & you have a duty to report your illness to your employer, child carer or school.

- food handlers involved with unwrapped or ready to eat food,
- staff of health care facilities in contact with food or patients,
- children aged below 5 years attending nurseries, playgroups, etc
- older children and adults who may find it difficult to carry out good personal hygiene

Infected people in these groups must not return to work, school or nursery until their symptoms have ceased and their bowel habits have been normal for at least 48 hours (without medication). This is provided that they wash their hands thoroughly after using the toilet.

Certain more dangerous infections, like E. coli O157, may have special requirements. These could be measures such as a longer exclusion or being tested to show you are no longer carrying the infection. You will be given further information in writing and by the Investigating Officer if these apply in your case.

It is very important to get in touch with us if you, or anyone else in your household, are in one of these 'high risk' groups. This is to enable us to give any necessary advice to halt the potential spread of the illness.

Visitors

It is strongly recommended you do not have any visitors (this includes friends, family and your children's friends) into your home until everyone within your home has fully recovered and the appropriate testing has confirmed the infection has totally cleared. This is particularly important for children under the age of 5 or older children/adults who are unable to carry out good personal hygiene.

How can I prevent it spreading?

Hand washing is the most important factor in preventing the spread of infection. Thoroughly wash your hands with soap under warm running water:

- AFTER using or cleaning the toilet
- AFTER touching anything contaminated by diarrhoea or vomiting
- AFTER attending to anybody who is unwell
- AFTER handling dirty laundry, clothing or bedding
- AFTER handling used nappies
- BEFORE handling, preparing, serving, or consuming food or drink
- AFTER touching animals during visits at farms, wildlife parks, zoos, pet corners, etc

People who are ill should ideally use anti-bacterial liquid soap and separate towels or disposable paper tissues. A nailbrush can assist you to clean under your fingernails. Always dry your hands properly as this helps to remove bacteria. Young children should be assisted to ensure they wash their hands properly.

Cleaning the toilet

For as long as people are unwell:

- Disinfect the toilet seat after each use, using a separate cloth
- Wash and disinfect other items like bedpans or potties after each use
- Disinfect the door handle, wash hand basin taps and flush handle after use
- Clean the toilet bowl using a toilet brush and disinfectant. Rinse the brush by flushing the toilet and replace in its holder
- Keep any rubber gloves used for cleaning the toilet for this use only
- Flush the toilet with the seat and lid down

Laundry

- Dirty laundry from persons with food poisoning should be kept separate from other laundry
- If possible remove any heavy soiling into the toilet before washing
- Wash soiled clothing and bedding separately on as hot a washing programme as possible without exceeding fabric care instructions

Food Safety Points to Remember

- ALWAYS keep raw meat separate from other foods
- ALWAYS cook meat thoroughly, including at barbecues. This is normally until the juices run clear
- AVOID eating or drinking untreated milk or dairy products, or drinking untreated water

**REMEMBER TO WASH YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY
ASSIST YOUNG CHILDREN TO WASH THEIR HANDS PROPERLY
MAKE SURE EVERYBODY FOLLOWS THESE PRECAUTIONS**

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