Food Poisoning

(Foodborne Disease; Foodborne Infection)

**Definition**
Food poisoning is a disease that is carried or transmitted to humans by contaminated foods or beverages.

**Gastrointestinal System**
**Causes**

Food poisoning is caused by substances in foods or beverages, including:

- Bacteria
- Poisons produced by bacteria
- Viruses
- Amoeba or parasites
- Chemicals

**Risk Factors**

Infants and the elderly are at increased risk for food poisoning. Other factors that increase your chances of getting food poisoning include:

- Poor hygiene
- Poor refrigeration
- Lack of knowledge of safe food preparation
- Weakened immune system, including during pregnancy

**Symptoms**

After you consume the contaminated food or beverage, there is a delay before symptoms arise. This delay is called an incubation period. It can last hours or weeks. Symptoms include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- **Diarrhea**
- Stomach pain
- **Dehydration** — if vomiting or diarrhea is severe
- Neurologic symptoms, including headache, lightheadedness, visual disturbances, and seizures
- Poor urine output
- Cramps
- Bloody stools, bloody vomit
- Fever, chills
- Muscle aches and pains
- Weakness

**Diagnosis**

You will be asked about your symptoms and medical history. A physical exam will be done. If you have some of the food that you think made you sick, you may be asked to bring it in to be tested.

Your bodily fluids may be tested. This can be done with:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Stool tests
- Vomit tests

**Treatment**

Most types of food poisoning improve in 12-48 hours. There aren't many treatments available to speed your recovery from food poisoning.

Treatments include:
Fluids
Drink plenty of fluids. If you are severely ill, IV fluids may be needed.

Antibiotics
Some types of bacterial food poisoning can be treated with antibiotics.

Self-care
This includes the following:

- Take acetaminophen for fever, aches, and pains.
- Start by drinking only clear liquids or sucking on ice chips. Then, try eating soft, bland foods if tolerated.
- If consuming milk products worsens symptoms, avoid them for several days.
- Check with a doctor before using antidiarrheal medications.

Antitoxin
If you have botulism poisoning, there is an antitoxin you can take.

Prevention
To help prevent food poisoning:

- Only eat and drink milk products that are pasteurized.
- Wash your hands thoroughly before touching food.
- Cook foods thoroughly.
- Always rinse fresh fruits and vegetables before eating them. Peel away any skin or rind.
- Be particularly careful when preparing chicken.
- Never put cooked meat on a surface that previously had raw meat on it.
- Use separate cutting boards for meat and other foods.
- Don't prepare any recipes that use raw egg, such as dressings and sauces. You can use powdered egg products in place of a fresh egg.
- Don't eat prepared food that has been outside a refrigerator for more than 2 hours, or 1 hour in very hot weather.
- Set your refrigerator temperature to below 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius).
- If you have a weakened immune system or are pregnant, don't eat raw shellfish, rare meat, or unpasteurized dairy products.
- If you are traveling:
  - Drink bottled water, not tap water.
  - Don't order drinks with ice.
  - Eat cooked fruits and vegetables instead of raw ones.
  - Don't eat food from street vendors.

Last Reviewed: November 2017 EBSCO Medical Review BoardDianne Scheinberg Rishikof MS, RD, LDN
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