



FOOD POISONING FACT SHEET

Food poisoning is caused by eating contaminated food and affects a large number of Australians every year. Food can be contaminated when it is handled, stored or prepared incorrectly. Some foods carry a higher risk of causing food poisoning, and some people are more at risk of getting food poisoning than others.

Food poisoning and bacteria

Food poisoning occurs when sufficient numbers of particular types of bacteria, or their toxins, are present in the food you eat. These bacteria are called pathogens.

High-risk foods

Food contamination is not just limited to foods you may consider risky, such as chicken or fish. Prepared fruits, vegetables and salads can also be potentially dangerous. Contaminated food will usually look, smell and taste normal. Food poisoning bacteria can grow and multiply on some types of food more easily than others.

Potentially high-risk foods include:

- raw and cooked meat, including poultry such as chicken and turkey, and foods containing these, such as casseroles, curries and lasagne
- dairy products, such as custard and dairy-based desserts like custard tarts and cheesecake
- eggs and egg products, such as quiche
- smallgoods such as hams and salamis
- seafood, such as seafood salad, patties, fish balls, stews containing seafood and fish stock
- cooked rice and pasta
- prepared salads like coleslaws, pasta salads and rice salads
- prepared fruit salads
- ready-to-eat foods, including sandwiches, rolls, and pizza that contain any of the foods above.

High-risk groups for food poisoning

Some people are more at risk of getting food poisoning than others. Take special care when buying, storing and preparing food for these people.

Vulnerable groups include:

- pregnant women
- the elderly
- young children
- people with chronic illness.

Causes of food poisoning

Pathogens such as Salmonella, Campylobacter and E. coli may be found in our food-producing animals. Care in processing, transport, storage, preparing and serving of food is necessary to reduce the risk of contamination.

Food poisoning bacteria can multiply very quickly, particularly in certain conditions. The factors that affect bacterial growth include:

- **Time** – in ideal conditions, one bacterium can multiply to more than two million in seven hours.
- **Temperature** – food poisoning bacteria grow best in the temperature range between 5 °C and 60 °C. This is referred to as the 'temperature danger zone'. This means that we need to keep perishable food either very cold or very hot, in order to avoid food poisoning.
- **Nutrients** – most foods contain enough nutrients for bacteria to grow. This is especially the case with potentially high-risk foods such as dairy and egg products, meat and poultry and seafood.
- **Water** – bacteria need water for their growth. Without water, growth may slow down or stop. That is why dried foods do not spoil.
- **pH** – is the measure of acidity or alkalinity and is also important for controlling bacterial growth. Low pH (acid conditions) generally stops bacterial growth, but where the pH of food is neutral, as is the case for many foods, most bacteria grow quite well.

Symptoms of food poisoning

The symptoms of food poisoning may vary depending on the type of bacteria causing the illness. Symptoms can range from mild to very severe. They can occur almost immediately after eating, or a number of hours later, and they can last from 24 hours to five days.

When you get sick, you usually experience one or more of:

- nausea
- stomach cramps
- diarrhoea
- vomiting
- fever
- headaches.

Some food-borne pathogens cause other symptoms. For instance, pathogenic *Listeria* bacteria may cause miscarriage or meningitis in susceptible people. Food poisoning can also lead to other long-term illnesses and symptoms.

If you think you have food poisoning

If you experience some of these symptoms and think you have food poisoning, see your doctor as soon as possible. It's also a good idea to report your illness to the Shire of Capel Health Services, so that the causes can be investigated. This is particularly important if you think the illness is related to eating out at a restaurant or café, or to food purchased from a shop or take-away outlet.