

Patient education: Food poisoning (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is food poisoning? — Food poisoning is an illness that can cause nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Food poisoning is caused by eating food that contains germs, such as bacteria, viruses, or parasites. One of the most common causes of food poisoning is norovirus. Two examples of bacteria that are common causes of food poisoning are Salmonella and E. coli. Parasites include tiny worms that people can catch in some countries.

How can germs get in food? — Germs can get in food in different ways:

- People who are sick can spread their germs to the food they cook if they do not wash their hands before they touch the food.
- Germs can live in or on food. If food is not washed or cooked enough, the germs in it or on it can infect people.
- Germs from one food can get on another food. This can happen when a person uses the same cutting board or knife to prepare different foods.

What are the symptoms of food poisoning? — Symptoms can happen right after a person eats the food, or not until days or weeks later. Common symptoms of food poisoning include:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Belly pain
- Diarrhea that can be watery or bloody
- Fever

Other symptoms can include problems with the nervous system, such as blurry vision or feeling dizzy. But these problems are not as common.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better? — Yes. You can:

- Drink enough liquids so that your body does not get "dehydrated." Dehydration is when the body loses too much water.
- Eat small meals that do not have a lot of fat in them
- Rest, if you feel tired

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — See your doctor or nurse if you:

- Have severe belly pain
- Cannot eat or drink
- Vomit blood or have blood in your bowel movements
- Have a fever higher than 100.4°F (38°C)

Young children and older adults with symptoms should make sure to see their doctor or nurse. That's because these groups can get dehydrated more easily.

Do I need to have tests? — Many people do not need to have tests. But it's possible that your doctor will do tests to check if you are dehydrated or to figure out which germ caused your food poisoning. Your doctor might do:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Tests on a sample of your bowel movement

How is food poisoning treated? — Many people do not need any treatment, because their symptoms will get better on their own. But some people need:

- Antibiotics – These medicines treat bacterial infections.
- Fluids through an "IV" – An IV is a thin tube that goes into your vein. People with a lot of diarrhea or vomiting might need IV fluids to treat or prevent dehydration.

Doctors do not usually recommend that people take anti-diarrhea medicines. That's because these medicines can make the symptoms last longer.

Can food poisoning be prevented? — You can reduce your chance of getting food poisoning or spreading germs that can cause food poisoning by:

- Washing your hands after changing diapers, going to the bathroom, blowing your nose, touching animals, or taking out the trash
- Staying home from work or school until you feel better (if you are sick)
- Paying attention to food safety. Tips include:
 - Not drinking unpasteurized milk or foods made with it
 - Washing fruits and vegetables well before eating them
 - Keeping the refrigerator colder than 40°F (4.4°C) and the freezer below 0°F (-18°C)
 - Cooking meat and seafood until well done
 - Cooking eggs until the yolk is firm
 - Washing hands, knives, and cutting boards after they touch raw food

For more food safety tips to prevent food poisoning, see the table ([table 1](#)).

Pregnant women and people whose bodies have trouble fighting off infections can do more things to prevent getting food poisoning. If you are pregnant or have trouble fighting off infections, talk to your doctor or nurse about other ways to prevent getting food poisoning.

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GRAPHICS

Tips for safe food handling

Purchase

Do not buy already-cooked food that is stored next to raw food, even if it is stored on ice.

Do not buy food in cans that are dented, cracked, or have a bulging lid.

Storage

Make sure meat and poultry products are refrigerated when bought.

Use plastic bags to keep juices from meat and fish from touching other foods.

Store perishable items (that can go bad quickly) in the refrigerator within an hour of buying.

Keep refrigerator temperature between 32 and 40°F (0 and 4°C) and freezer temperature at or below 0°F (-18°C).

Freeze meat and poultry that will not be cooked within 48 hours.

Freeze tuna, bluefish, and mahi-mahi that will not be cooked within 24 hours. Other fish can be stored in the refrigerator for 48 hours.

Do not store eggs on the refrigerator door (since that is the warmest part of the refrigerator).

Put leftovers in the refrigerator within 2 hours of cooking them.

Divide leftovers into parts and store in small containers.

Reheat leftovers to 165°F (74°C) before eating.

Preparation

Wash hands with soap and water before cooking and after handling raw meat, poultry, fish, or raw eggs.

Thaw frozen meats and fish in the refrigerator or microwave, not by leaving them out.

Marinate foods in the refrigerator, not at room temperature.

Avoid contact of cooked foods with forks, spoons, knives, plates, or areas that might not be clean.

Wash forks, spoons, knives, plates, and cutting areas with soap and water after they have touched raw meat, poultry, fish, or eggs.

Avoid letting the juices from uncooked meat, poultry, or fish touch cooked foods or foods that will be eaten raw.

Carefully wash all fresh fruits and vegetables.

Avoid recipes that include raw eggs.

Cooking

Use a meat thermometer.

- Cook beef, veal, and lamb (steaks, roasts, chops) to 145°F (63°C) and rest for 3 minutes.
- Cook ground beef, pork, veal, and lamb to 160°F (71°C).
- Cook poultry (chicken, turkey) to 165°F (74°C).
- Cook fresh pork (roasts, chops, ham that is not precooked) to 145°F (63°C) and rest for 3 minutes.
- Cook precooked ham to 140°F (60°C).
- Cook fish until the flesh is firm and separates easily with a fork.
- Cook shellfish until the flesh is firm.

Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm.

Boil juices from raw meat or fish before using on cooked food.

Serving

Serve cooked foods on clean plates with clean forks, spoons, and knives.

Keep hot foods at 140°F (60°C) and cold foods below 40°F (4°C).

Never leave foods at room temperature longer than 2 hours, or 1 hour if the room is hotter than 90°F (32°C).

Use coolers and ice packs to take perishable foods (that might go bad) away from home.

United States Department of Agriculture. Food Safety. Available at <http://www.foodsafety.gov> (Accessed on January 19, 2016).

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