

# FOOD POISONING



## BASIC INFORMATION

### DESCRIPTION

A term commonly used to describe illnesses suspected of being caused by food eaten within the previous 48 hours. It can affect several members of a household, multiple customers who dined at a particular restaurant, nursing home patients or children in day care facility. In most cases the food is contaminated by bacteria or viruses. The symptoms can begin within 30 minutes if the cause is chemical poisoning, 1-12 hours if bacteria toxins are involved, and 12-48 hours with salmonella or virus infections. Symptoms similar to those caused by food poisoning can also be caused by emotional stress, food intolerance, drugs, hepatitis, appendicitis, or other disorders.

### FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Nausea and vomiting.
- Abdominal cramps or pain.
- Diarrhea.
- In severe cases, shock and collapse.
- Fever.
- Bloody stools.

### CAUSES

- Bacterial organisms such as *Salmonella*, staphylococci, clostridia, *Escherichia coli*, *Bacillus cereus*, etc. Botulism is a rare, life-threatening form of food poisoning.
- Virus infection such as Norwalk virus (common contaminant of shellfish), adenovirus, and rotavirus.
- Chemical causes such as contamination with high doses of insecticide or food served in lead-glazed pottery.
- Eating plants or animals that contain a naturally occurring poison such as mushrooms or toadstools or shellfish (may contain a neurotoxin that is resistant to cooking).

### RISK INCREASES WITH

- Eating food that is improperly prepared.
- Lack of good hygiene when preparing food.
- Drinking water or eating raw foods when traveling in a foreign country.

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Avoid raw seafood or meat.
- Avoid unpasteurized food products.
- Proper cooking and storage of foods. Keeping food preparation areas, cutting boards, and cooking utensils clean.
- Throwing out food items that are old, have an "off" smell, or those in bulging tin cans.
- Attention to handwashing before preparing food.

### EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Most food poisoning is not serious and recovery generally occurs within 3 days.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Shock and collapse.
- Respiratory problems.
- Hospitalization may be required for a very young patient or an elderly debilitated patient.



## TREATMENT

### GENERAL MEASURES

- Replacement of fluids and electrolytes is the most important aspect of treatment.
- Save any samples of food left from a recent meal to help pinpoint the cause if need arises.
- If needed for diagnosis, cultures may be made from sample of patient's vomit, feces, urine or blood.
- If several persons are affected, local health department should be contacted so they can interview patients and food handlers and take samples of suspected contaminated food.
- Additional information available from the Food Safety and Inspection Service, Office of Public Awareness, Dept. Of Agriculture, Rm. 1165-s, Washington, DC 20205, (202) 447-9351.

### MEDICATIONS

Medications usually not prescribed for this disorder. If symptoms are severe (protracted vomiting, painful abdominal cramps), and the causative agent is known, antibiotics may be prescribed.

### ACTIVITY

Bed rest during acute phase. Convenient access to a bathroom or bedpan is important.

### DIET

- Liquid diet using special oral glucose-electrolyte preparations, clear broth, or bouillon. Use salt and sugar in liquids to replace what was lost. Try to take small sips even if vomiting continues. This will help with volume replacement and oral rehydration.
- Progress to soft, bland diet. Return to regular diet gradually.



## NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has signs or symptoms of food poisoning.
- Symptoms worsen after treatment begins. Hospitalization may be required to prevent dehydration.