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How to manage food poisoning at home

While symptoms of food poisoning tend to subside relatively quickly, they can be nasty and put you out of action. Here are some tips on managing food poisoning at home and how you can reduce your risk of contracting it in the future.

What is food poisoning?

Food poisoning is caused by eating something that has been contaminated with germs or toxins. Many germs can cause food poisoning, including bacteria, parasites, and viruses.

How do you get food poisoning?

GP [Dr Hana Patel](#) explains that many foods can cause food poisoning. Often food poisoning is caused by eating food after its advised 'use by' date or eating contaminated food.

Other causes of food poisoning include:

- Food not being cooked properly or the recommended cooking instructions – for example raw or undercooked meat.
- Eating frozen food after it has been left out of the freezer for too long.
- If the person preparing the food is unwell and their germs have spread.
- If the person preparing the food hasn't washed their hands first – cross contamination.
- Food being reheated against advice.
- Food being frozen or chilled against advice.
- Food not being stored correctly.

Thorrún Govind, pharmacist and chair of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, says: "Food poisoning can be caused by a few different bacteria - campylobacter is quite common in the UK. There's also [salmonella](#) or *Escherichia coli* ([E. coli](#)). Food can be contaminated by viruses, such as the [norovirus](#), too."

What are the symptoms of food poisoning?

Symptoms of food poisoning include:

- Vomiting.
- Nausea.
- Fever.
- Diarrhoea.
- Abdominal pains.
- Body aches.
- High temperature - above 38°C.
- Chills all over.
- Tiredness.

How to treat food poisoning at home

Govind's tips for managing food poisoning at home

- Have lots of fluids to avoid dehydration - mainly water; avoid alcohol, caffeine, and fizzy drinks.
- Avoid other people to reduce risk of passing on illness.
- Stay off work or school for 48 hours after your last episode of vomit or diarrhoea.
- Make sure you've had no symptoms for at least two days before socialising again.
- Consult your pharmacist for medication to help manage symptoms.

You should rest as much as possible while you have food poisoning and, even if you don't feel like eating, try to have small, light portions. Plain foods are good, such as plain toast or crackers.

How long does food poisoning last?

If you have food poisoning, you will likely feel unwell a short time after eating, perhaps a few hours. However, symptoms can be delayed by a few days, even weeks.

Vomiting typically only lasts a day or two, but sometimes longer. As for diarrhoea, this commonly lasts for several days. Dr Patel says symptoms of food poisoning tend to pass within a week.

Do I need to see a doctor about food poisoning?

If your symptoms last for longer than a week and over-the-counter medicines have proved ineffective, it might be time to get advice from your doctor.

Dr Patel says: "If, after a week, you are not able to drink fluids as you normally would, not able to manage the symptoms of [vomiting](#) or [diarrhoea](#), have a high temperature, or symptoms such as bloody diarrhoea, you should consult your GP."

These lasting symptoms could be the sign of an infection, which will need treatment.

You also need to see someone if you are finding if you are passing less and less urine or you cannot manage any oral fluids at all. In these cases, you should go to your nearest hospital.

You should be extra mindful and seek medical advice if you are a pregnant woman, elderly, have a weakened immune system due to a long-standing health condition, or if your food poisoning was caught abroad.

How to prevent food poisoning

While it might not be possible to avoid food poisoning completely, there are safety measures you can follow when preparing and eating food to minimise the risk.

As mentioned before, there are various hygiene factors which often contribute to food poisoning. Therefore, you should ensure you wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before making a meal or eating. This is also important if you're feeding someone else.

If you are unwell, do not get involved with the food preparation process.

You should also:

- Make sure hair is tied back before cooking.
- Remove jewellery.
- Roll-up long sleeves.
- Avoid touching your face mid-meal preparation.
- Avoid touching pets before and during meal preparation.
- Ensure work surfaces are clean.

When it comes to the food itself, ensure you are following the instructions on the packaging, rather than trying to cut corners. This means being extra careful when freezing, chilling, or reheating food, knowing what temperatures to cook things on and how long for, and what food should look or feel like when it is fully cooked.

The standard advice from the Food Standards Agency is to cook food until it has reached a core temperature of 70°C and stayed at that temperature for 2 minutes¹. This is particularly important when cooking meat.

The Food Standards Agency adds: "Cooking food at the right temperature and for the correct length of time will help to ensure that any harmful bacteria are killed. You can check the temperature of a food using a clean temperature probe. Insert the probe so that the tip is in the centre of the food or the thickest part."

Additionally, make sure to wash fruits and vegetables before eating, and keep raw foods separate on your kitchen counter. If you plan to use one utensil or chopping board for multiple food items, wash the item in between. A specific chopping board should be kept for raw foods only.

Once you are finished in the kitchen, wash down your surfaces and clean your utensils with hot, soapy water.

Further reading

1. [Food Standards Agency: Cooking your food.](#)

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Authored by: Emily Jane Bashforth	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCGP	
Originally Published: 20/11/2023		Document ID: doc_32073

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