

Food Poisoning

Food poisoning is most often caused by bacteria growing in food that has not been prepared or stored properly. Vomiting, diarrhea, and other symptoms may occur within hours after your child eats the contaminated food. The problem usually clears up within a day or two. In some types of food poisoning, symptoms take longer to develop.

What is food poisoning?

Food poisoning is a general term that describes an illness that comes from eating food that contains toxins—usually made by bacteria—or germs that cause infection. Most often, the symptoms occur soon after eating food contaminated with bacteria, such as the common “staph” (*Staphylococcus*) bacteria. Nausea, vomiting, and other symptoms occur because of toxins produced by the bacteria. Once the toxins leave the body, your child should feel better.

In other types of food poisoning, symptoms develop more slowly. These include contamination of food with *Salmonella* or *Shigella* bacteria, or with certain viruses. It is sometimes difficult to tell if food is what made your child sick. Symptoms develop at different times, depending on what bacteria are the cause. If symptoms don't clear up in a day or two, or if certain symptoms such as bloody diarrhea occur, call our office.

What does it look like?

Common symptoms of food poisoning include:

- Nausea and vomiting.
- Abdominal pain and cramps.
- Diarrhea.
- Symptoms may develop within a few hours after eating contaminated food or may take a day or two to develop.

! Rarely, more serious symptoms may develop, such as bloody diarrhea or muscle weakness. *Seek medical care immediately if these conditions occur.*

What causes food poisoning?

There are many different types/causes of food poisoning:

- For food poisoning developing within 4 to 12 hours, the usual cause is bacteria such as *staph* bacteria or *Bacillus cereus*. The symptoms aren't caused by the bacteria themselves but rather by toxins produced by the bacteria.
- Symptoms developing after a day or two may be related to different types of bacteria, such as *Salmonella*. Sometimes the cause may be a virus. For these slower developing

types of food poisoning, you may not even realize the infection came from food. Instead, it may be called *gastroenteritis* or “stomach flu.”

Some more serious food-related infections are possible, but less common. *These are more serious conditions requiring immediate medical care.* !

- Bloody diarrhea may be caused by a bacteria called *Escherichia (E.) coli* 0157:H7. This infection can sometimes cause a disease called *hemolytic-uremic syndrome*, which can lead to anemia and kidney damage.
- Muscle weakness and other neurologic symptoms may be caused by bacteria called *Clostridium botulinum* (botulism) or by toxins found in certain foods, especially in shellfish and mushrooms/toadstools. Botulism in infants usually causes constipation; in adults, it can cause either constipation or diarrhea.
- Food allergies may be mistaken for food poisoning. The most serious types of allergic reactions include sudden itching, hives, difficulty breathing, and low blood pressure. This is called *anaphylaxis* or allergic shock.

What are some possible complications of food poisoning?

- Food poisoning usually clears up within a few days. The main problem to watch out for in your child is dehydration (not enough liquids). This may occur if your child is having a lot of vomiting or diarrhea.
- Certain types of food poisoning are less common but more serious, requiring medical care (for example, botulism, *E. coli* 0157:H7).

What puts your child at risk of food poisoning?

Eating foods that have been improperly prepared or stored. See preventive measures below.

Can food poisoning be prevented?

- Wash your hands before cooking or preparing food.
- Keep kitchen surfaces and utensils clean.
- Make sure meats are fully cooked. Don't let raw meat come into contact with other foods.
- Keep foods refrigerated. Outbreaks of food poisoning most often occur when food is left out for a long time, such as at picnics.
- Don't use any foods that are outdated (expired) or smell “off.” Don't use food from bulging cans.

How is food poisoning treated?

- For the most common types of food poisoning, no treatment is needed. Vomiting, diarrhea, and other symptoms get better in a few days.
- Antibiotic treatment may or may not be needed, even if the cause is bacteria. Symptoms are usually caused by toxins produced by the bacteria. Once the toxins are gone, your child should feel better.
- If the doctor does recommend antibiotics, make sure your child finishes his or her prescription; don't stop giving the medication because he or she seems better.
- The doctor may recommend tests to determine what is causing your child's vomiting, diarrhea, or other symptoms. On the other hand, if your child has typical symptoms that are clearly related to eating contaminated food, no testing may be needed.
- Regardless of the cause of nausea and vomiting, the most important treatment is fluid replacement to prevent dehydration. This is especially true in infants, who can lose body fluids very rapidly.
- Special solutions, such as Pedialyte, are available to replace lost body fluids. These products provide not only water but also necessary sugars and electrolytes (salts).
- If your child becomes dehydrated, he or she may need larger amounts of these fluids. The fluids can be given in small amounts frequently: as little as a teaspoon every minute or two. Over time, you can gradually give larger amounts of fluid replacement less often. Your child can eat other foods too, if tolerated.
- Giving fluids is important, even if your child is vomiting. Vomiting usually decreases with time.

 *If vomiting continues or is severe, and your child is not "holding down" any fluids, he or she may need to go to*

the hospital. There he or she can receive intravenous (IV) fluid replacement, along with other needed treatment.

- Usually, children shouldn't use over-the-counter antidiarrheal medicines, such as Imodium or Kaopectate. These products don't help much and may cause side effects.
- If your child has any of the more serious food-related infections, other treatments will be recommended. If your child hasn't recovered in the expected time or if new symptoms develop, call our office.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child's vomiting, diarrhea, and other symptoms don't clear up within 2 or 3 days.
- Your child has severe or continued vomiting that makes it difficult to give enough fluids.

If any of the following appear, *call our office immediately:* 

- Diarrhea with visible blood.
- Muscle weakness or other neurologic symptoms.
- Symptoms of dehydration:
 - Dry mouth.
 - Decreased tears.
 - Weight loss.
 - Little or no urine produced.
 - Fast heartbeat.
 - Irritability or extreme tiredness.
- In infants, going 6 to 8 hours without wetting a diaper; sunken eyes or soft spot at the top of the head (fontanelle)