

Food poisoning

Food poisoning is not usually serious. Most people get better within a few days. You can usually treat yourself or your child at home.

Food poisoning is usually caused by eating food that is carrying bacteria (contaminated).

Symptoms of food poisoning

The main symptoms of food poisoning include:

- feeling sick (nausea)
- vomiting (getting sick)
- diarrhoea, which may contain blood or mucus
- stomach cramps
- tummy pain
- weakness and a lack of energy
- loss of appetite
- [a high temperature \(fever\)](#)
- aching muscles
- chills

The symptoms usually start within 1 to 2 days after eating contaminated food. Symptoms can start between a few hours and a few weeks later.

In most cases, these symptoms will pass in a few days and you will make a full recovery.

Causes of food poisoning

You can get food poisoning if you eat something that has been contaminated.

This can happen if food is:

- not cooked or reheated thoroughly
- not stored correctly – for example, it has not been frozen or chilled
- left out of the fridge for too long
- handled by someone who's ill or has not washed their hands

- past its "use-by" date

Cross-contamination is where harmful bacteria are spread between food, surfaces and equipment. This can happen if you prepare raw and cooked food on the same chopping board.

Foods that can be contaminated if not handled, stored or cooked properly include:

- raw meat
- raw shellfish
- unpasteurised milk
- ready-to-eat foods such as cooked sliced meats, pâté, soft cheeses and pre-packed sandwiches

Germes that cause food poisoning

Food poisoning is usually caused by:

- campylobacter bacteria - usually found on raw or undercooked meat (often chicken)
- salmonella bacteria - often found in raw or undercooked meat, raw eggs, milk and other dairy products
- listeria bacteria - can be found in pre-packed sandwiches, cooked sliced meats and soft cheeses
- e. coli bacteria - usually found in undercooked beef
- [norovirus](#) - which can spread from person to person through contaminated food or water

Treatment for food poisoning

You can usually treat yourself or your child at home. Stay at home until the symptoms have stopped.

Rest and try to drink plenty of water, even if you can only sip it. This will help prevent dehydration.

Eat when you feel up to it. Try small, light meals at first and stick to bland foods, such as toast and rice until you begin to feel better.

Oral rehydration solutions are recommended for vulnerable people, such as an older person or someone who is frail. You can get these in the pharmacy.

Speak to a GP if

you think you have food poisoning and:

- you're unable to keep down fluids because you are vomiting
- your symptoms do not start to improve after a few days
- you have symptoms of severe dehydration such as confusion, a rapid heartbeat and passing little or no urine
- you're pregnant

- you're over 60
- your baby or young child has suspected food poisoning
- you have a long-term underlying condition such as inflammatory bowel disease, diabetes or kidney disease
- you have a weak immune system - for example, because of medication, cancer treatment or HIV

 [Find a GP](#)

Your GP may send a sample of your poo for analysis and prescribe antibiotics. They may refer you to hospital so you can be looked after more closely.

Reporting food poisoning

If you think your food poisoning has been caused by a restaurant or other food business, you can report it to your local environmental health office.

Environmental health officers may investigate the food premises. They can ask the business to improve its hygiene standards.

[Contact details for local environmental health offices](#)

[Make a complaint about a food or food business - fsai.ie](#)

Tips to prevent food poisoning

Help reduce your risk of food poisoning at home.

Wash your hands

Wash and dry your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water especially:

- before handling food
- after handling raw food
- after touching the bin
- after going to the toilet
- after blowing your nose
- after touching animals, including pets

Wash worktops

Wash worktops before and after preparing food. Do this particularly after they've been touched by raw meat, raw eggs, fish and vegetables. You do not need to use antibacterial sprays - hot, soapy water is fine.

Wash dishcloths

Wash dishcloths and tea towels regularly. Let them dry before you use them again. Germs spread on dirty, damp cloths.

Use separate chopping boards

Use a separate chopping board for raw food, such as meat and fish. This is to avoid contaminating cooked food with harmful bacteria. This bacteria can be present in raw food before you cook it.

Keep raw meat separate

Keep raw meat away from ready-to-eat foods such as salad, fruit and bread. This is because these foods will not be cooked before you eat them. Any bacteria that get onto the foods from the raw meat will not be killed.

Store raw meat on the bottom shelf

Always cover raw meat and store it on the bottom shelf of the fridge. This is so it cannot touch or drip onto other foods.

Cook food thoroughly

Cook meat until steaming hot. There should be no pink meat inside. Do not wash raw meat (including chicken and turkey) before cooking. This can spread bacteria around your kitchen.

Freezing raw chicken reduces the levels of campylobacter bacteria (common in raw chicken). But it does not eliminate them completely. The safest way to kill all traces of campylobacter is by cooking chicken thoroughly.

Use your fridge correctly

Keep your fridge temperature below 5 degrees Celsius. Use a fridge thermometer to check it. This prevents harmful germs from growing and multiplying.

Avoid overfilling your fridge. If it's too full, air cannot circulate properly. This can affect the temperature.

Cool leftovers quickly

If you have cooked food that you're not going to eat straight away, cool it as soon as possible. Do this within 90 minutes. Store it in the fridge or freezer. Use any leftovers from the fridge within 2 days.

Cooked food should be cold before you put it in the fridge.

Respect use-by dates

Do not eat food that's past its use-by date, even if it looks and smells OK. Use-by dates are based on

scientific tests. These show how quickly harmful bugs can develop in packaged food.

Date labelling on food - stopfoodwaste.ie

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