



FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS

Food-borne illness (or food poisoning) is mainly caused by pathogenic (harmful) bacteria, viruses or chemical toxins in food or water (either naturally occurring or introduced). Some of these microbes (germs) infect our bodies and grow, while others produce a toxin in food. The end result is illness, and in very severe cases food poisoning may even cause death.

Food does not need to be spoiled to cause food poisoning. Food that looks, smells and tastes fine can cause food poisoning if it has not been handled correctly, kept under temperature control or has been contaminated in some way.

A great proportion of food poisoning is due to:

- an ill food handler preparing food for others to eat.
- allowing food to be held for an extended period at a temperature that allows bacteria to grow (between 5°C and 60°C).
- cross contamination in the kitchen. *For instance foods such as raw meat and poultry can have harmful bacteria on the surface. If hands, utensils or the preparation area are not thoroughly cleaned after being in contact with these products, other foods can be contaminated and make people ill.*
- eating food that is not cooked thoroughly.
- a food handler preparing food without washing their hands properly.

The symptoms of food-borne illness include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal cramps, fever and headaches. The incubation period (the time between eating the food and the appearance of the first symptoms) may be as short as one hour or as long as a week or more. This means that the last meal consumed may not necessarily be the culprit. The duration of illness (time the symptoms last) may also vary from a few hours to more than a week.

It is estimated that at least 1.5 million Australians suffer from a food related illness each year, many of which are not reported. The most common reported food-borne diseases in South Australia are caused by the bacteria *Campylobacter* (averaging around 600 reports each year) followed by *Salmonella* (averaging around 2,000 reports each year). Many gastro outbreaks are attributed to viruses and there are also many other less common types of food-borne illness caused by organisms such as *Shigella*, *Listeria*, *Clostridia* (botulism) and *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Cases of food poisoning can occur with a wide range of foods whether it is manufactured, prepared at home, or at the local supermarket, take-away or restaurant. **The risk of food poisoning can be virtually eliminated if the food is properly handled, protected from contamination, stored correctly, and cooked or reheated to the correct temperature.** You can help to prevent food poisoning by following the guidelines on the back of this fact sheet.

HOW TO PREVENT FOOD POISONING

FOOD HANDLING/PERSONAL HYGIENE

Bacteria and viruses that can cause illness if transferred to food can be found in people's bowels, noses, and in sores and infected wounds. Some germs can transfer to food through coughing or sneezing over food and via handler's hands if they have not been effectively washed.

- Before handling any food, hands should be thoroughly washed using soap under warm running water and then dried. Also wash hands after using the toilet.
- If food handlers are unwell, in particular with gastroenteritis, they should not handle or serve food. This is because they would be shedding large numbers of germs from their bodies. *Food handlers in South Australia are required to advise their supervisor if they are suffering from symptoms of a food-borne illness.*
- Minimise touching of cooked and ready to eat food - use utensils such as spoons and tongs to handle foods.

TEMPERATURE CONTROL

Storing food at incorrect temperatures can allow multiplication of food poisoning bacteria. These bacteria generally grow between temperatures of 5°C and 60°C.

- Hot food should be kept hot, above 60°C, and cold food should be kept cold, 5°C or lower.
- Reheated foods should be quickly reheated until all parts of the food reach 75°C.
- Cook chicken, sausages, hamburgers and stuffed meats until juices run clear - steaks can be cooked to preference.
- Store cooked food by placing it into shallow containers (so that the food cools quickly) and refrigerate as soon as possible - the longer you leave food out at room temperature the more bacteria can multiply.
- Do not hold cooked foods at warm (bacterial growing) temperatures for long periods of time - monitor and minimise the time the food is kept warm and dispose of left over warmed foods after 4 hours.
- Ensure the temperature inside refrigerators is not higher than 5°C, with adequate airflow around food ensuring an even temperature distribution.
- If you prepare food several hours before serving keep it under temperature control; 5°C or cooler or 60°C or hotter.

FOOD CONTROL

Many foods, like raw meat (especially poultry) can contain bad bacteria on their surfaces. These raw foods can "cross contaminate" ready-to-eat food if they are not stored or handled carefully.

The following steps should be taken when handling and storing food:

- Use different chopping boards, utensils and plates when preparing raw foods and ready-to-eat food - or sanitise in a dishwasher or by washing and treating with a chemical sanitiser before re-use.
- Ensure juices from raw meats and poultry can not drip onto other foods and contaminate those foods (wrap or contain the raw meats in an appropriate manner).
- Use clean and dry utensils for serving the food - never place cooked meat back on the trays that held the raw meat.
- Hands should be washed thoroughly, (using soap and warm running water), and dried before handling cooked or ready-to-eat food and immediately after handling raw meat or poultry.
- Cover food adequately to protect it from contamination.
- Dishcloths should be regularly sanitised or replaced and food preparation surfaces kept clean/sanitised.

What should you do if one of your customers reports that they think they are suffering from a food-borne disease?

Recommend that the customer:

- *consult a doctor to provide them any treatment that is necessary.*
- *contact their local council Environmental Health Officer.*

The customer may have contracted the food poisoning elsewhere or may be suffering from some other form of illness. However, if it has been caused by your food business it is in your best interests and that of your future customers to investigate and remedy the problem.

The Department of Human Services can provide advice and may initiate an investigation if there are associated cases.