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FOOD POISONING

Food Poisoning is any illness caused by eating food. Allergies, heavy metals, bacteria, viruses and chemicals can all cause food poisoning.

Bacteria are tiny living cells, which can be seen only under a microscope. There are many bacteria on our bodies and all around us, but most of them are harmless. Some bacteria are beneficial to us, for example, the bacteria that ripen cheese and yoghurt.

A few of them however, are harmful and if eaten in sufficient quantity with our food they may cause food poisoning. The degree of poisoning depends on the length of time the bacteria have had to multiply and therefore the number of bacteria in the food.

Bacteria will multiply very quickly under certain conditions. The ideal temperature for growth of most food poisoning bacteria is body temperature (37-38°C). Under ideal conditions of warmth and moisture, bacteria on food surfaces can double in number every 10 minutes.

Bacteria also require moisture, so moist environments will support bacterial growth better than dry foods. It is for this reason that dish cloths and wooden chopping boards are ideal for bacterial growth.

The common food poisoning bacteria are Salmonella, Campylobacter, Giardia and Shigella.

What Should I do If I Suspect I Have Food Poisoning?

- Consult with your family doctor and request a stool sample be taken so the type of food poisoning may be determined.
- Make a list of all the foods eaten in the past 3 days and refrigerate any food you suspect may have caused your illness.
- Contact your local Environmental Health Officer so they can investigate your illness if required.
- If possible, do not handle or prepare foods while you have symptoms. If you work in the food industry you need to notify your employer.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before handling any food.

You can reduce the likelihood of food poisoning. Following some basic rules can prevent it:

Hand washing

- Hands must be thoroughly washed after visiting the bathroom, handling a baby's nappy or animals. Bacteria present in the bowel of an infected person can be transmitted to other people if strict regard is not paid to personal hygiene.

Prevention of 'cross-contamination'

- A number of food poisoning bacteria are naturally present in raw foods such as meat and poultry. This can be transferred to other foods. This is called cross-contamination.
- Raw meats should be kept at the bottom of the refrigerator so that blood cannot drip onto other foods. Never place-cooked meat onto a plate used for raw meats unless the plate has been thoroughly washed.
- It is also important to wash hands after handling raw foods, pet meats and fertilisers since bacteria may be present in these. Chopping boards and work surfaces should be cleaned with hot water and detergent after contact with raw foods.

Temperature control

- Most bacteria will not multiply at temperatures below 5°C and are usually killed if heated to temperatures above 60°C. Therefore it is important to store meat, poultry and dairy foods in the refrigerator and to cook these foods well before eating.

Treatment of pets

- A vet should treat pets showing symptoms of diarrhoea. Children and adults should wash hands after touching animals.

For a wide range of up to date information on topics such as communicable diseases and skin penetration, visit the Department of Health's Population Health A-Z directory of Health Topics at:

<http://www.population.health.wa.gov.au/directory/>

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