Have you ever had food poisoning? Food poisoning is the common term many people use to refer to foodborne illness. The exact number of foodborne illness cases that occur each year is hard to determine because many people attribute their illness to a virus or flu. The local Health Department and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cannot record the number of cases accurately unless the ill person seeks medical care, which is unusual in mild cases. The CDC has calculated an estimate of the number of cases of foodborne illness based on corrections for under reporting, misdiagnosis, and the number of cases that are not caused by contaminated food. The CDC estimates that there are almost 9.4 million cases of foodborne illness each year in this country that are caused by 31 different pathogens. Almost 56,000 cases will be severe enough to require hospitalization; 1,351 deaths are possible each year.

Anyone can get a foodborne illness, but the people who are most susceptible are the very young, pregnant women, the chronically ill, and the elderly. Young children are susceptible due to their immature immune systems. Pregnant women, actually their unborn baby, are susceptible because the mother’s immune system is slightly reduced during the months of pregnancy and the pathogen can be transferred to the fetus. Chronic illnesses could compromise a person’s immune system, or the medical treatment they are receiving for their condition may adversely affect their immunity leading to foodborne illness susceptibility. Likewise, the elderly are susceptible because of aging and also because of the incidence of other chronic diseases that affect the immune system.

Some symptoms of foodborne illness are similar to flu symptoms. Many foodborne illness symptoms include nausea, diarrhea, fever, stomach cramps, and vomiting. Severe illnesses may cause septicemia or meningitis. Pregnant women may miscarry. Many of the deaths that are caused by foodborne illness are in the elderly. The severity of the symptoms may depend on how much food was eaten and the age and health status of the person.

A common misconception is that people can tell if food is spoiled by the way it either looks or smells. The truth is that harmful pathogens are present everywhere and food can be contaminated if it is not handled properly. Many of the pathogens or bacteria that cause foodborne illnesses are very hard to get rid of, but their spread can be controlled by careful food preparation. These four basic principles can be followed to prepare food and keep it safe.

- **Wash hands and surfaces often.** Wash hands before handling food. As you prepare food, wash hands often with soapy water and keep everything clean that is in contact with food.
- **Prevent cross contamination.** Raw food can have bacteria on it that can contaminate other foods. Wash hands, utensils, cutting boards, and work surfaces with hot soapy water after contact with raw meat and poultry.
• **Cook foods to proper temperatures.** Meats should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 degrees F. Use a meat thermometer to check temperatures. Never cook meat in an oven below 325 degrees F. Meat should not be pink and juices should be clear. If reheating foods, they should also reach a temperature of 165 degrees F or come to a full rolling boil. Drinking raw milk or eating raw or undercooked meat is risky and should be avoided by anyone who is susceptible for foodborne illness.

• **Store food at a safe temperature.** If foods should be served cold, be sure they remain cold and not at room temperature. The refrigerator should maintain a temperature between 35 and 40 degrees F. Hot prepared food should be held at 135 degrees F or higher until food service is completed. Then, the food should be packaged in shallow containers (2–3 inches deep maximum) and refrigerated. If leftovers can’t be eaten in 4–7 days, freeze until needed for a future meal.

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**References**


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For more information about food safety, visit [Foodsafety.osu.edu](http://Foodsafety.osu.edu).

Written by Barbara Rohrs.

Revised by Lydia Medeiros and Jeffery LeJeune.