

Food Poisoning Myths

Myths & Facts about Foodborne Illness

Myth 1: *Foodborne illness is caused by the last thing you ate.*

Fact: Foodborne illness can be caused by food ingested a few hours ago, a few days ago, a few weeks ago, and sometimes even a few months ago. The length of time from ingestion to illness (called the incubation period) can vary greatly depending on what microbe is making you sick

Myth 2: *Small children are the only ones at risk for severe cases of foodborne illness.*

Fact: While certain populations such as small children, the elderly, pregnant women and those with weakened or compromised immune systems are most at risk for severe disease, due to many factors anyone can fall ill with a severe case of foodborne disease.

Myth 3: *Symptoms such as stomachache, vomiting, and diarrhea are caused by “the stomach flu”.*

Fact: The term “stomach flu” is used incorrectly as “the flu” is a respiratory disease process while stomachaches, vomiting and diarrhea are gastrointestinal by nature.

Myth 4: *All foodborne illnesses are the same.*

Fact: There are about 250 different types of foodborne illnesses with a lot of variation in onset periods, typical foods they are found in, severity of disease, symptoms and consequences. The amount ingested and the unique immune system of the individual exposed can also affect the outcome.

Myth 5: *Foodborne illness is just a temporary inconvenience.*

Fact: While some foodborne illness only causes minor inconvenience and is self-limited, many foodborne illnesses are being linked to long-term disease, severe health consequences, and even death. *E. coli* O157:H7 is the leading cause of acute kidney failure in American children, and can also lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, and seizures. Salmonellosis can lead to reactive arthritis, and *Campylobacteriosis* causes about 40% of all cases of sudden-onset paralysis (Guillain Barre Syndrome)

Myth 6: *Safe cooking can prevent all foodborne disease.*

Fact: While cooking raw foods to their recommended temperatures is a safeguard that can help protect American families, cross contamination from raw meat and poultry to utensils, hands, platters, and cutting boards is problematic. In addition, fresh fruits and vegetables eaten without a cooking kill step are causing more and more outbreaks of foodborne disease.

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Myth 7: *Foodborne illness is caused by food that has spoiled.*

Fact: Foodborne illnesses are mostly caused by contamination due to bacteria, viruses and parasites that do not affect the appearance, taste, smell, or texture of the food you eat. While some of these contamination bugs will increase in number while we store food, it is important to have safeguards in place so food isn't contaminated when it reaches our kitchens and restaurants in the first place.

Myth 8: *You have to eat a contaminated food to come down with a foodborne disease.*

Fact: People who are sick can also pass the diseases on through the fecal-oral route. For this reason, babies and toddlers who are ill should be excluded from daycare and sick restaurant and food workers should be sent home. Hospitals and nursing homes are also settings where foodborne illnesses readily pass from person to person without adequate hand washing and good hygiene. Children have often gotten ill at petting zoos and fairs by contact with carrier farm animals.

Myth 9: *Everyone recovers equally well from foodborne illness.*

Fact: Recovery from a foodborne illness is dependent on many factors including age, general health, the immune system of the individual, whether or not they have just had surgery, or just finished taking antibiotics, the particular microbe and the amount of it ingested, and adequate medical care.

Myth 10: *If other people ate the same meal that you did and did not get sick, then that meal did not cause your illness.*

Fact: The bugs that cause foodborne disease are not uniformly distributed throughout your food, and could be in one part and not in another. In addition, every person has a unique immune system which may react differently when eating the same contaminated food.

