



**Placer County
Cooperative Extension Office**
11477 E Avenue
DeWitt Center
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 889-7350

**Nevada County
Cooperative Extension Office**
255 So. Auburn Street
Veteran's Memorial Hall
Grass Valley, CA 95945
(530) 273-4563

Website:
<http://ceplacernevada.ucanr.edu>

**For more information,
contact:**
Rosemary Carter
UC CalFresh Program Mgr.
(530) 889-7350

Email:
carter@ucanr.edu

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Eat Healthier.](#)

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Foodborne Illness



Foodborne illness (commonly called food poisoning) is any illness resulting from eating food that has been contaminated with a variety of germs (bacteria, viruses, parasites) or toxic substances (molds, contaminants). After eating the contaminated food, there is a delay before symptoms of food poisoning begin. This delay may range from hours to days, depending on the germ and on how many germs you swallowed.

Frequently Asked Questions

What kind of food is most likely to make me sick?

Nearly any food that has been contaminated, but seafood, produce, poultry, beef and eggs are the top five foods. Raw foods (including unwashed produce), undercooked meats and seafood, and inadequately refrigerated foods are riskiest, since refrigeration retards the growth of bacteria and cooking at high temperatures kills most of them.

What organism made me sick?

Unless you have a stool test, you will probably never know. There are more than 200 foodborne infections, caused by bacteria (notably *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *Staphylococcus*, and *E.coli*), viruses, and parasites. Toxins in the food (such as mushroom toxin and toxins from some fish) can also cause illness.

How long does it take before I get sick?

The incubation period can be anywhere from one hour to several weeks. For the most common infections, it takes 4 to 48 hours for symptoms to appear. For parasites, it can take more than a month.

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Frequently Asked Questions (continued)

Why do only some people get sick?

Food may be unevenly contaminated, so not everyone will consume the same amount of organisms. Also, some people, such as the very young and the elderly, are simply more susceptible to certain infections.

How long does the illness last?

Usually a day or two, but sometimes several days or even weeks, depending on the type of organism and the individual's health.

Food that looks or smells bad is more likely to make me sick, right?

No, the microorganisms that cause spoilage are different from those that cause foodborne illness. Those that cause foodborne illness seldom produce noticeable changes in food. Food that looks and smells okay is just as likely to make you sick as food that looks spoiled.

How do I know it isn't a stomach flu?

There is no such thing as stomach flu; the influenza virus does not cause diarrhea and vomiting in adults. But it may well be an intestinal virus, such as rotavirus or norovirus. These "stomach bugs" are highly contagious and travel in feces. Food preparers or handlers who don't wash their hands thoroughly after using the bathroom are the most common source of outbreaks. You can get infected from consuming contaminated food or water or from touching contaminated objects and then touching your mouth or nose.

Nobody got food poisoning in my grandmother's day. Why is that?

In some cases, foods or organisms are different today, according to the Institute of Food Technologists. Foods may contain new organisms, and organisms can evolve to become more infectious. People did get sick, but they usually didn't know it was foodborne illness or food poisoning. Food is much safer today, thanks in large part to preservatives and better knowledge about food handling and preparation.



When should I go to the doctor?

If you have bloody stool, fever, severe abdominal pain, prolonged or severe vomiting or diarrhea, or are very dehydrated, you should see a doctor. The elderly, young children, pregnant women, and anyone with a weakened immune system should seek medical attention even if symptoms are mild.

While the American food supply is among the safest in the world, the Federal government estimates that there are about **48 million cases of foodborne illness annually**. Each year these illnesses result in an estimated 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. Take precautions to keep food safe.

***Clean *Separate *Cook *Chill**