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New Zealand Food Safety

Haumaru Kai Aotearoa

What causes **food poisoning?**

Find out more about food poisoning:
the causes, the symptoms and what to do
in case you get sick.



What to do in case you get **food poisoning**

A wide variety of bacteria, fungi, parasites, viruses and other organisms – can cause illness in people. Many of these can contaminate food or produce toxins. Knowing what to watch out for so you don't contaminate food that you, your family or friends are going to eat is important.

It can take from as little as 20 minutes to several weeks to become sick from food that's been contaminated. For most people foodborne illness will be mild, in serious cases it can be life-threatening or cause hospitalisation.

What to do if you think you have an illness caused by food:

- **Contact your doctor right away.**
Your doctor may request samples for testing. Tests will identify if you have a foodborne illness.
- This will be **notified to your public health unit**, which will investigate the source of the disease to manage the risk of it spreading.
- Follow your doctor's instructions to get better.

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DISCLAIMER

Every effort has been made to ensure the information in this guide is accurate. New Zealand Food Safety tries does not accept any responsibility or liability whatsoever for any error of fact, omission, interpretation or opinion that may be present, however it may have occurred.



More information about bacteria, virus, parasites and toxins that cause food poisoning in New Zealand

NAME	POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS (FROM MOST TO LEAST COMMON)	FOODS AND CAUSES LINKED TO OUTBREAKS	HOW SOON IT TYPICALLY STRIKES
Bacillus cereus (bacteria)	Two different forms of foodborne illness: 1. Vomiting, nausea, occasionally diarrhoea 2. Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, occasionally nausea	Rice, spices and foods containing starch-based products e.g. gravies, casseroles and sauces.	1 to 6 hours (vomiting) 10 to 12 hours (diarrhoea)
Campylobacter (bacteria)	Muscle pain, headache, fever, followed by diarrhoea (can be bloody), abdominal pain, nausea	Undercooked chicken, unpasteurised milk, undercooked liver, untreated drinking water.	2 to 5 days but can range from 1 to 10 days
Ciguatera (toxin)	Nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, muscle pain followed by neurological symptoms including headache, temperature reversal (hot things feel cold and cold things feel hot), dizziness, tingling, muscular weakness, irregular heartbeat	Ciguatera poisoning is generally associated with private imports of imported reef fish from the tropics. It is not known from New Zealand caught fish.	Within 6 hours
Clostridium botulinum (bacteria)	Nausea and vomiting followed by neurological symptoms including weakness, dizziness, double vision, difficulty speaking, swallowing and breathing, abdominal distension	Canned or bottled foods that haven't received adequate heat treatment. Honey (infants only).	12 to 36 hours
Clostridium perfringens (bacteria)	Severe abdominal pain, watery diarrhoea, occasional vomiting and nausea	Meat dishes especially rolled roasts, stuffed meat, soups, stews, gravies, rice and pies that have been cooled too slowly allowing bacteria to grow.	10 to 12 hours, but can range from 6 to 24 hours
Cryptosporidium parvum (parasite)	Watery diarrhoea, vomiting, stomach cramps, weight loss	Contact with farm animals, untreated drinking water, recreational water contact and contaminated fresh produce, contact with sick animals and contact with sick people.	3 to 11 days
Shiga toxin-producing E. coli (STEC)	Severe abdominal pain, watery (then bloody) diarrhoea, occasionally vomiting	Untreated drinking water,unpasteurised milk, contaminated fresh produce.	2 to 8 days
Giardia intestinalis (parasite)	Diarrhoea, flatulence, stomach cramps	Contaminated fresh produce.	1 to 3 weeks
Hepatitis A (virus)	Fever, malaise, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, jaundice	Contact with a case, shellfish, infected food handlers.	10 to 50 days
Listeria (bacteria)	Non-invasive: diarrhoea, fever, muscle pain, headache, occasionally abdominal cramps and vomiting Invasive: fever, headache, diarrhoea, vomiting, septicaemia, encephalitis, meningitis, spontaneous abortion or stillbirth	Ready-to-eat products, such as deli meats and salads, cooked poultry products, smoked seafoods, soft cheeses and foods with a long refrigerated shelf life are often linked to outbreaks of Listeria. Once food is contaminated with Listeria the bacteria multiply quickly, even at the recommended refrigeration temperatures of 2-4°C.	Non-invasive: 11 hours to 7 days Invasive: 1 day to 3 weeks

NAME	POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS (FROM MOST TO LEAST COMMON)	FOODS AND CAUSES LINKED TO OUTBREAKS	HOW SOON IT TYPICALLY STRIKES
Norovirus (virus)	Nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, headache, low-grade fever	Shellfish, contaminated water, infected food handlers.	24 hours but can range from 10 to 50 hours
Salmonella (bacteria)	Nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, fever, headache	Tahini, raw meats, untreated water, infectious food handlers.	6 hours to 2 days
Scombrototoxin (toxin)	Tingling or burning sensation in the mouth, upper body rash, reduced blood pressure, headache, itching, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea	Many generally darker-fleshed fish species can cause histamine poisoning if not kept chilled after capture. Species often implicated in New Zealand outbreaks are kahawai, trevally and kingfish.	A few minutes to a few hours
Staphylococcus aureus (bacteria)	Nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, occasionally diarrhoea	Poor hygiene management of ham, cooked meats, yoghurt, chicken salad, pasta dishes, bakery products (especially cream filled), cheese.	2 to 4 hours but can range from 30 minutes to 7 hours
Toxic shellfish (toxin)	1. Amnesic shellfish poisoning: vomiting, nausea, diarrhoea, abdominal cramps; followed by neurological symptoms headache, dizziness, vision disturbances, loss of short-term memory 2. Diarrhetic shellfish poisoning: vomiting, nausea, diarrhoea, abdominal cramps; 3. Neurotoxic shellfish poisoning: difficulty in swallowing, double vision, unsteadiness and tremors, nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting, numbness, tingling of the mouth, lips and extremities 4. Paralytic shellfish poisoning: numbness and a tingling around the mouth, face, and extremities (hands and feet), difficulty swallowing or breathing, dizziness, headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, paralysis	Recreationally gathered shellfish	Within 24 hours and as rapid as 10 minutes – 3 hours for neurotoxic and paralytic poisoning
Vibrio parahaemolyticus and Vibrio vulnificus (bacteria)	Diarrhoea, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, headache, fever, chills	Recreationally gathered raw oysters and clams, crabs, shrimps.	4 hours to 4 days