

New Zealand Food Safety

Haumaru Kai Aotearoa

Food safety when you have **low immunity**

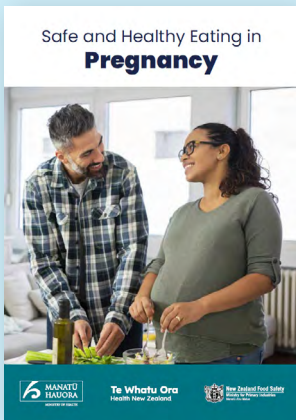
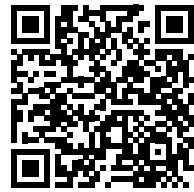


Want to know more?



If you have low immunity or are caring for someone who has, it's even more important that you follow good food safety and hygiene practices.

Scan QR to
download your
free [Food safety
at home](#) booklet



Healthy eating and food safety are important for you and your baby when you're pregnant.

Scan QR to
download your
free [Safe and
Healthy Eating in
Pregnancy](#) guide



Make sure to thoroughly wash and dry fresh fruit and vegetables before eating (see page 10).



What is low immunity?

Your immune system fights harmful bacteria and viruses that can make you sick. Having low immunity means your immune system is not as strong as it should be. This means you are at higher risk of getting infections – including those transmitted by food – and your illness could be more serious. So, you have to be more careful what you eat.

At some point in our lives, we are all at a higher risk than normal from foodborne illness. Several health conditions, surgical or medical treatments, and age could reduce your immunity or make infections more serious. In pregnancy, common infections can cause more serious illness for the mother and affect the unborn child. Newborn babies also take time to build immunity.

Appropriate advice on what is safe for you may depend on what has caused your low immunity. Your doctor or dietician might make some changes to the advice in this booklet to suit your individual circumstances.

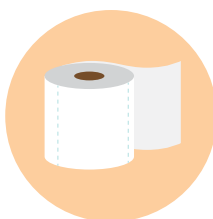
How to avoid getting sick from food

Food can sometimes be contaminated by toxins, bacteria, parasites, or viruses. If food is handled incorrectly, you may get sick, and this could be more likely and more severe if you have low immunity.

Common symptoms include:



**Nausea
or vomiting**



Diarrhoea



**Stomach
cramps or pains**



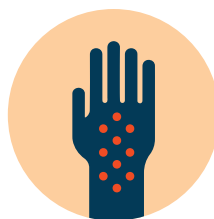
**Chills
or fever**



**Muscle or
joint aches**



Headaches



**Allergic
reactions**



If you have low immunity and think you have an illness caused by food, it's important that you contact your doctor right away – **don't wait until your next appointment.**

Fruit & Vegetables



You can minimise your chance of getting a foodborne illness by:

- **knowing which foods are higher-risk**, and avoiding them
- **selecting safer foods**
- **following general food safety guidelines** when preparing and storing food (see page 2 for QR code to download your free *Food safety at home* booklet)



It can take as little as 20 minutes or as long as several weeks to become sick after eating contaminated food, and it might not be caused by the last food you ate.

Foodborne illness can be mild but sometimes (especially if you have low immunity) it can be life-threatening.

What causes low immunity?

Age, pregnancy, illness, surgery or medical treatments can result in low immunity.



If you are unsure about your immunity or have concerns, talk to your doctor or other health professional, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.

Age and pregnancy

Babies and sick children

Still developing or weakened immune systems can affect babies and children who have serious illnesses.

Pregnancy

Immunity levels are lower than usual during pregnancy, making some illnesses more serious for both mothers and unborn children. (See page 2 for QR code to download your free *Safe and Healthy eating in pregnancy* booklet.)

Elderly

As you age, your immune system gets weaker. So, older people, particularly with ongoing (chronic) illnesses, could have low immunity.

Illness

Cancer	Having advanced cancer, taking chemotherapy drugs or having radiotherapy lowers immunity.
HIV/AIDS	HIV/AIDS directly affects the immune system's cells. If your disease is more advanced, you are at higher risk of infection.
Inflammatory bowel disease	Ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease cause low immunity — especially if you are taking higher doses of drugs like steroids (cortisone, prednisone) or immune suppressants like salazopyrine.
Neutropenia (low white blood cell count)	A low blood neutrophil cell count can result in a higher risk of infection. Neutropenia may occur with radiation therapy or chemotherapy.

Surgical or medical treatments

Low stomach acidity	Stomach acid provides a defense by killing harmful germs. However, germs can survive, grow and cause an infection when acid is absent or reduced. This can happen if you regularly take antacids for heartburn, are on medication for gastric reflux and peptic ulcers, or have had a stomach operation.
Transplant procedures	A transplant (kidney, liver, heart, lung, bone marrow) or taking anti-rejection drugs, such as tacrolimus or cyclosporine, can lower immunity.
Immuno-suppressive drugs	Taking prednisone and azathioprine — used for medical conditions including arthritis and autoimmune disease — can cause low immunity. Ask your doctor whether you are on this type of drug and if the dose is enough to leave you prone to foodborne illness.

Higher-risk foods

Food is generally safe, but occasionally it can be contaminated with harmful germs (such as *Listeria*) that can make you sick. Some types of food are at higher risk of contamination than others and should be avoided, or at least carefully prepared, while your immunity is low.

Dairy products

Most dairy products in New Zealand are pasteurised. Pasteurisation is a heat treatment that kills harmful germs in raw products. But pasteurised food can also become contaminated once opened and make you sick if you eat it.

Dairy foods to avoid when you have low immunity include:



Soft cheeses (for example, brie, camembert, blue, ricotta, mozzarella, feta, halloumi and paneer) — unless they are cooked, because cooking kills harmful bacteria. If you know the cheese has been commercially wrapped and properly refrigerated, you can eat a small amount immediately after opening it for the first time. Soft cheeses you've opened and stored could be more contaminated because harmful germs, in particular *Listeria*, can grow at fridge temperatures.



Raw or unpasteurised drinking milk and products.



Smoothies or shakes prepared at restaurants or takeaways.

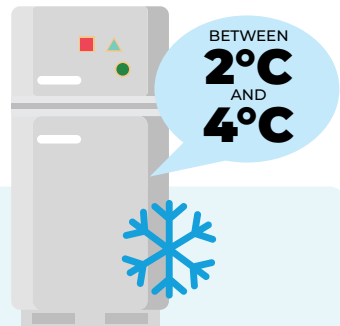


Soft-serve ice cream.

How to reduce your risk



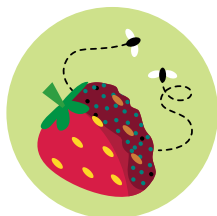
Choose single servings of dairy products if available (such as individual pouches, tubs, and wrapped slices or segments).



Store dairy products in a clean fridge with a temperature between 2°C and 4°C.

Vegetables, salads, and fruit

To avoid harmful germs that could be on raw fruit and vegetables, follow this advice:



Don't eat damaged fruit or vegetables.



Thoroughly wash and dry fresh fruit and vegetables before eating.



Avoid foods that are difficult to clean — like raspberries, some herbs, mushrooms, bean sprouts or sprouted seeds — unless they are going to be cooked.

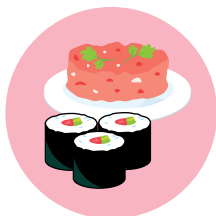


Prepare salads right before you eat them.

Note: Depending on the state of your immunity and the stage of your treatment, your doctor or dietician may advise you to peel or cook some fruit before eating. You might also need to avoid eating some raw fruit and vegetables.

Meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs

If you have low immunity, you should avoid:



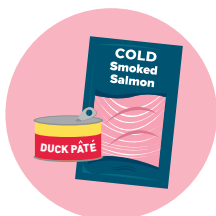
Raw or undercooked meat, including poultry, pork, fish and shellfish.



Raw or undercooked eggs.



Foods containing raw eggs, such as mayonnaise, dressings containing mayonnaise, hollandaise sauce, Caesar dressing, and some desserts (unless the products are labelled as containing pasteurised eggs).



Cold meats, pâté, or cold-smoked fish or chicken.



Meat, seafood, and eggs should only be eaten if cooked until piping hot (over 75°C).

Choosing safer foods

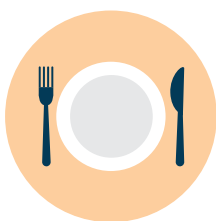
Whether buying food, eating out or travelling overseas, people with low immunity need to be more careful about what they eat. Here are some tips on how to do that.

In the store



- **Don't buy food past its use-by date.**
- **Avoid damaged fruit or vegetables.**
- **Choose single servings of dairy products** like yoghurt, ice cream and cheese if available (for example, individual pouches, tubs, and wrapped slices or segments).
- **Avoid chilled products that are not cold** to the touch if you will eat them without cooking.

At restaurants and takeaways



- When eating out or buying takeaways, **avoid the same higher-risk foods you would at home** (see pages 8 to 11).
- To minimise risk, **choose food that is well-cooked, prepared just before it is served to you, and is served piping hot** (over 75°C).

When travelling



- If you're going overseas, **take extra care**. Some countries have high rates of foodborne illness.
 - Water supplies could also be unsafe – even adding ice to your drink could be risky.
 - A good option is fruit you peel before eating
 - Seek advice from your doctor, who might refer you to a travel health clinic.
-

Non-commercial foods



This includes meat from animals that:

- you hunt, gather, catch, or kill yourself
- are killed on a farm or private property (homekill).

As these foods are not prepared with the same safety rules that apply to commercial foods, make sure they were handled correctly and are well-cooked before eating them. **If in doubt, avoid.**

Buying food online



Scan QR code to visit MPI's public register website

Buying food online can be quick and convenient, but not all sellers follow the same food safety rules. Minimise risks by:

- **buying from trusted sellers** — avoid those that use only social media or aren't registered (look them up on MPI's [public register](#))
- **checking product information** for recalls, use-by dates, allergen warnings, and storage instructions
- **ensuring product packaging is intact** and sealed to prevent the risk of contamination.

If the food smells off, looks discoloured, or you notice anything unusual, don't eat it.

Water



- **Use treated or commercially bottled water for drinking and cooking** (treated water is usually from a town water supply).
- If treated water isn't available (e.g. it's from a roof tank, well, bore, lake or stream), boil it for at least a minute before drinking, washing fruit and veges, making ice, or cooking in it.
- To reduce potential exposure to lead and other metals, flush taps used for drinking and cooking for at least 10 seconds first thing in the morning.

Wash

Use soap and
clean water.

Rinse well.



Dry

Front and back
with clean towel.



Handwashing

Handwashing is one of the best ways to prevent foodborne illness, and people with low immunity should be more thorough. Washing hands before preparing or eating food helps prevent germs spreading to your food.

Also wash your hands after:

- touching raw meat and poultry
- going to the toilet or changing nappies
- sneezing, coughing or blowing your nose
- tending to someone who is sick
- handling pets or animals
- gardening
- handling rubbish

To make sure they're really clean, wash them for 20 seconds on both sides using soap and clean water. Use a nail brush to remove dirt from under your nails and cuticles. Then dry your hands with a clean, dry towel or paper towel for another 20 seconds. Drying is just as important as washing.



Hand sanitisers are not as effective as soap and water for removing germs and harmful chemicals. But if hand sanitiser is all you have available, make sure it has at least 60 percent alcohol. Rub it into your hands and fingers until they are dry.

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New Zealand Government
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa