

Gastroenteritis - salmonellosis

Salmonellosis is a form of gastroenteritis caused by the germ (bacterium) *Salmonella*. Salmonellosis can affect anyone; however, most cases occur in children and young adults. The severity of symptoms depends on the number of bacteria you ingest, your age and your general health. You may be more prone to salmonellosis if you are elderly, have another medical condition (such as a weakened immune system) or are malnourished.

The symptoms of salmonellosis

Symptoms of salmonellosis usually occur between 6 to 72 hours after you ingest the bacteria. The most common symptoms include:

- Diarrhoea, which may contain blood or mucous
- Fever
- Headache
- Stomach cramps
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Dehydration, especially among infants and the elderly.

In rare cases, septicaemia (local infection) may develop as a complication of salmonellosis.

Salmonellosis is spread by mouth

Salmonellosis occurs when *Salmonella* bacteria are taken in by mouth. This may happen in any of the following ways:

- Eating undercooked meat, especially poultry, and raw or undercooked eggs.
- Eating cooked or ready to eat food that has been contaminated with *Salmonella* bacteria from raw food, such as raw chicken. This is called **cross-contamination** and can also happen when food comes into contact with contaminated kitchen surfaces, such as chopping boards and utensils that have been used with raw food.
- People with salmonellosis have *Salmonella* bacteria in their faeces. If these people do not wash their hands properly after going to the toilet, their contaminated hands can spread the bacteria to surfaces and objects that may be touched by others or food that will be eaten by others. Hands can also become contaminated when changing the nappy of an infected infant.
- Pets and farm animals may have *Salmonella* bacteria in their faeces without having any symptoms. People can get salmonellosis from these animals if they do not wash their hands after handling them.

You may be infectious for several weeks

Although the illness usually only lasts for a few days, the bacteria may be present in your faeces for several weeks. One per cent of adults and five per cent of children may carry the bacteria for more than a year.

If you develop gastroenteritis

To find out if you have salmonellosis, the doctor will ask you for a stool (faeces) sample for testing. If the results show that you have salmonellosis, the doctor will be able to provide advice and appropriate treatment, and will notify the Department of Human Services.

If you think you got the infection from contaminated food, contact the health department of your local council. Keep any leftover food that you believe may have caused you to become ill as this will help trace the source of the bacteria.

Food-borne outbreaks of salmonellosis do occur, and tracing the source is an important public health responsibility.

How to avoid getting salmonellosis

To help protect yourself and others from salmonellosis:

- Thoroughly cook food derived from animal products - especially poultry, pork, eggs and meat dishes.
- Don't use dirty or cracked eggs.
- Keep your kitchen clean. Raw foods can contaminate surfaces.
- Store raw and cooked foods separately.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and hot running water for 10 seconds before handling food.
- Store high risk foods at or below 5°C or at or above 60°C to prevent growth of bacteria.
- Do not handle cooked foods with the same utensils used for raw foods, unless they have been thoroughly washed between use.

To prevent the spread of infection:

- Keep children home from school, child care or kindergarten until symptoms have stopped.
- Food handlers, childcare workers and health care workers must not work until symptoms have stopped.
- Clean bathrooms and other surfaces regularly.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- The health department of your local council
- Communicable Disease Control Unit, Department of Human Services, Victoria Tel. (03) 1300 651160
- Public Health Division, Department of Human Services Tel. (03) 9096 0000

Things to remember

- Eating undercooked animal products, such as poultry and eggs, can cause salmonellosis.
- Safe food handling and thorough hand washing can help prevent Salmonellosis.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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