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Foodborne Illness

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Have you ever considered that the gastrointestinal illness you acquired could actually have been from something you ate? The Center for Disease Control *estimates* that each year 1 in 6 Americans become ill with a foodborne illness. Thirty one of the most common or important agents of foodborne disease caused approximately 9.4 million illnesses, 55,961 hospitalizations, and 1,351 deaths in 2011 in the United States alone. Some of the most common foodborne illness agents causing hospitalization in 2011 included: Salmonella nontyphoidal, Norovirus, Campylobacter, and Toxoplasma gondii. Of these, Salmonella nontyphoidal, Toxoplasma gondii, and Norovirus caused the highest amount of foodborne deaths in 2011. It is important to note that Salmonella has not declined in 15 years. Norovirus is considered a mild foodborne illness but it is a leading cause of death because it is highly transmissible and affects so many people.

Most foodborne illness agents cause the same common symptoms making diagnosis difficult. Common symptoms include vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, fever, and chills. These symptoms, although unpleasant, are normally not life threatening. However, for the very young, elderly, or people immunocompromised or already fighting other disease, they can be deadly. Agents that cause foodborne illness may be bacterial in nature, viral, parasitic, or even fall under the classification of fungi which includes yeasts and molds. Viruses and parasites need a living host to survive. Parasites usually infect a person through contaminated water or cross contamination of other items from the infected person. Viruses infect the cells of a person and in the cells they replicate to the point of causing illness. Bacteria need the nutrients found in potentially hazardous foods to grow and multiply – including pH, water, time, and warm temperatures. Some grow with air and some without air. They multiply in huge amounts in the ‘temperature danger zone’ – above 41°F and below 135°F. Some bacteria produce toxins at these temperatures which cannot be killed by reheating the food, freezing it, or proper sanitizing.

You can reduce your chances of becoming ill from foodborne agents by using the following precautions:

- If you dine out, make safer food selections by using the following guide:
 - Be aware of the dangers of eating raw or undercooked foods. Ask the server or chef about the potential dangers of eating raw shellfish or undercooked burger.

- Ask how an item is prepared? Recipes may be prepared differently than what you anticipate and there may be raw or undercooked ingredients within the food.
- You can always request that your food be fully cooked to the proper temperature required to kill off bacteria and viruses.
- Risky foods include:
 - sauces or items made with raw eggs such as fresh Caesar salad dressing, custards, mousse, some puddings, meringue pie, or any soft cooked eggs. These items may contain Salmonella enteritis.
 - Raw or unpasteurized milk, some soft cheeses such as camembert, brie, feta. These items may contain Listeria monocytogenes, E. coli, Campylobacter, or Salmonella.
 - Raw or rare ground beef may contain E. coli or Salmonella.
 - Raw or undercooked molluscan shellfish such as raw oysters or clams may contain Vibrio vulnificus or Hepatitis A.
 - Raw fish including sushi, ceviche, or tuna carpaccio may contain Vibrio parahaemolyticus.
- **Wash your hands, often and thoroughly.** Don't let your hands be a vector of foodborne agents.
- Keep your own kitchen clean and sanitized. Use chlorine bleach and follow the mixing instructions on the back of the bottle for sanitizing your kitchen and bath.
- Check over your meats and produce at the grocery store or market and look for obvious signs of spoilage, if it looks suspicious, don't buy it.
- Make sure food is held at the proper temperatures. Cold food should be held at 41°F or less regardless of whether it's at the grocery store, your favorite restaurant, or your own refrigerator. Prepared hot foods should be held at 135°F or higher.
- In your own kitchen, prevent cross contamination of cutting surfaces, counters, utensil, and storage units. Remember, your hands can be the biggest contributor of cross contamination as well!
- Always wash fresh fruits and vegetables before cutting into them, and remember to keep them at 41°F or less after they are cut.
- Reheat food quickly and cool food rapidly to prevent bacterial and toxin growth.
- Thaw foods under refrigeration, under cold running water, or use a microwave.

Follow these simple guidelines to reduce your potential for obtaining a foodborne illness and keeping your family safe. And, as always, call your local health department if you have questions regarding food safety concerns.

