**Barbeque Season Is Upon Us, But Food Born Illness is Year Round**

**What is Foodborne Illness?**

Food safety is a vital part of staying well. Each year, about 76 million people in the United States become ill from eating contaminated foods. Thousands are hospitalized and around 5,000 die. The illnesses they get may come from eating foods contaminated with bacteria, viruses, or parasites. Illnesses you get from contaminated food are called foodborne illnesses, also known as food poisoning.

**Older Adults Are at Increased Risk**

Foodborne illness can affect anyone, but older adults are at increased risk. As we age, our bodies produce less stomach acid, making it harder to get rid of harmful bacteria that enter our digestive system. Our digestion may slow down, allowing harmful bacteria to stay in our bodies longer. Also, changes in smell and taste can keep us from knowing when food is spoiled.

Foodborne illnesses can cause serious health problems for older adults. An older person who gets a foodborne illness is likely to be sicker longer, and if hospitalized, is likely to have a longer hospital stay.

**Reasons for Foodborne Illness**

There are many reasons why foodborne illnesses affect us today. People are eating more meals outside the home and consuming more food that is prepared by others. Much of the food we consume is delivered over longer distances. Also, harmful bacteria that are more resistant to drugs are finding their way onto foods.

Foodborne illnesses can be dangerous. Many are caused by bacteria such as *E. coli* and *salmonella,* which can cause serious health problems. But if you follow good food safety practices, you can reduce your risk of getting sick from these and other harmful bacteria.

**The USDA recommends 4 steps to handling food safely: Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill. To see more information check the** [**Be Safe with Food Fact Sheets**](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/f8d66b64-104b-4638-8f38-c203d2cd8684/BeFoodSafe_Logo___All_Ads.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&amp;CACHEID=40b82161-495f-42d8-970a-62573d6e45ba#page=2)

**Symptoms of Foodborne Illness**

It can be difficult to know when harmful bacteria in food have made you sick. After all, you can't see, smell, or taste the bacteria the food may contain. If you get a foodborne illness, you might have upset stomach, abdominal pain, vomiting, or diarrhea. Or, you could have flu-like symptoms with a fever and headache, and body aches. Sometimes people confuse foodborne illness with other types of illness.

Many times people think their foodborne illness was caused by their last meal, but that may not be true. The time between eating the contaminated food and the onset of illness can vary widely. Usually, foodborne bacteria take 1 to 3 days to cause illness. But you could become sick anytime from 30 minutes to 3 weeks after eating some foods with dangerous bacteria. Whether you actually get sick or not depends on a variety of factors, including the type of bacteria in the food.

**If You Have Eaten Contaminated Food**

If you think you have a foodborne illness, you should take these steps.

1. **Contact your doctor or health care provider.** Seek medical treatment as necessary. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that if consumers have questions about foodborne illnesses, they should contact CDC’s 24-hr/7-days a week hotline: 1-800-232-4636.
2. **Preserve the food in question.**Wrap it securely, label it "Danger", and freeze it. The food may be used to diagnose your illness and prevent others from getting sick.
3. **Save all packaging materials, such as cans or cartons.** Write down the food, the date and time consumed, and save any identical unopened products.
4. **Report the contaminated food to the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-6854.**To report a suspected problem with a food, consumers should call FDA Consumer Complaint coordinator in their state. A complete list can be found at:[**www.fda.gov/safety/reportaproblem/**](http://www.fda.gov/safety/reportaproblem/consumercomplaintcoordinators/default.htm)
5. **Call your local county or city health department** if you think you became ill from food you ate at a local restaurant or other eating establishment so they can investigate.

Getting ill from eating contaminated food can be very serious. However, the good news is that if you know how to handle, prepare, store, and consume foods safely, you can reduce your risk of getting a foodborne illness.