

# Campylobacter Infection - Food Poisoning Factsheet

## What is Campylobacteriosis and how common is it?

Campylobacteriosis is caused by bacteria (germs) called Campylobacter which bring on diarrhoea. It's the most common bacterial cause of diarrhoea in the UK and it's likely many other cases are either undiagnosed or go unreported. Virtually all cases occur as isolated events and not as a part of any large outbreaks.

The condition occurs much more frequently in the summer months. It's found more often in infants and young adults and in males more often than females.

## How is Campylobacteriosis caught?

Most cases occur from handling raw poultry or eating undercooked poultry meat but it can be caught from contaminated water and milk.

A very small number of germs are needed to cause illness in humans - just one drop of juice from raw chicken meat, for instance. A common way of becoming infected is to cut raw poultry meat on a cutting board and then use the unwashed or lightly rinsed board to prepare foods such as salad vegetables or cold meats. Because these foods do not need cooking, any contamination from the chicken can survive and be passed on.

The germ is not usually spread from person to person unless the infected person is a small child or is producing a large amount of diarrhoea, but some become poorly through contact with an ill dog or cat.

## How does Campylobacter get into food?

Many chicken flocks have birds with Campylobacter within their intestines but no symptoms of any illness. More than half of the raw chicken on sale in the UK is thought to have Campylobacter on it. The germ is also present in giblets, especially on the liver.

Unpasteurised milk can become contaminated if the cow has a Campylobacter infection or if the milk is contaminated with manure. Because so few germs are needed to cause illness, it's very difficult to prevent contamination, even with the best dairy hygiene standards. Surface waters and mountain streams can be contaminated with infected faeces from cattle or wild birds.

## What are the symptoms of Campylobacteriosis?

Most people develop diarrhoea, abdominal pain and sometimes fever within 2 to 5 days of becoming infected. For some, it can take up to 11 days for symptoms to start whilst others may develop no symptoms. The diarrhoea may be bloody and can be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. Abdominal pain may persist for several days after other symptoms subside.

In persons with reduced immunity, the illness can occasionally spread to the bloodstream and cause a very serious illness. Most people recover completely within 2 to 5 days although it can take a few days longer. Arthritis and other serious long term effects are possible but these are rare.

# Campylobacter Infection - Food Poisoning Factsheet

## How do you know if you have Campylobacteriosis?

Many different kinds of infections can cause diarrhoea and bloody diarrhoea. Campylobacteriosis can only be diagnosed by growing the germ from a stool sample in a laboratory.

## How is Campylobacteriosis treated?

Virtually all persons infected will recover without any specific treatment but it's important to drink plenty of fluids as long as the diarrhoea lasts. In more severe cases, antibiotics can be used and may shorten the duration of symptoms if given early in the illness.

## What can I do to prevent Campylobacteriosis? What can I do if I have it?

There's no vaccine nor do you become immune to it, so it's important to prevent it spreading and to avoid infection as far as possible.

- Cook all poultry products thoroughly. Make sure the meat is cooked throughout and any juices run clear.
- If you're served undercooked poultry in a restaurant, do not eat it. Complain to the manager and to your local Environmental Health Department.
- Wash your hands with soap and hot water before and after handling raw meats.
- Avoid cross-contamination of foods – remember how few germs are needed to cause illness.
- Carefully clean all cutting boards, work surfaces and utensils with detergent and hot water after preparing raw meats. Use separate chopping boards for raw and ready-to-eat foods wherever possible.
- Avoid consuming unpasteurised milk or water that may be polluted. The clear hillside stream may be tempting on a hot summer's day but looks can be deceptive.
- If you have the illness and work with children or the elderly, or work in a hospital or a food business, advise your supervisor. Your local Environmental Health Department, who can investigate to try and prevent further cases, may contact you.
- Campylobacter germs stay in your system for several days after symptoms stop, so it's important to maintain a very high level of personal hygiene during this time.