

Clostridium Perfringens Infection - Factsheet

What is Clostridium perfringens food poisoning? How common is it?

Clostridium perfringens food poisoning is a short diarrhoeal illness resulting from undercooking of meats, particularly large joints. Because it's a germ that's widespread in animals and the environment, meat may be contaminated with its heat-resistant spores. If the meat isn't properly cooked, the spores survive, grow and multiply as the meat cools.

When the germ is eaten, it turns into a spore again and releases a toxin (poison) that causes diarrhoea. It takes a lot of toxin to cause diarrhoea so only eating large numbers of Clostridium perfringens can cause it.

How is Clostridium perfringens caught?

Clostridium perfringens is caught from eating meat in which the germs survived cooking. Typically, large joints of meat, or preparations of meat such as stews, are the foods involved as their centres often do not reach a sufficient temperature to kill Clostridium perfringens.

What are the symptoms of Clostridium perfringens? Are there any long term complications?

This is a short term illness, generally lasting under 24 hours. The symptoms are diarrhoea and abdominal pain. Fever and vomiting are unusual. Because the illness is caused by a toxin (poison) made by Clostridium perfringens, illness comes on within a short time of eating the contaminated food; usually 12 to 24 hours.

As with any diarrhoeal illness, dehydration can result but generally the period of illness is so short that people previously in good health weather it without problems.

How do you know if you have Clostridium perfringens infection? How is it treated?

Diagnosis is best done by finding the toxin in the faeces but this is very difficult to do unless a specimen is provided very quickly during or after the illness. By the time any tests are able to be done, the toxin is likely to have gone. Instead, the diagnosis is usually reached by finding unusually large numbers of Clostridium perfringens germs, instead of the toxin, in the faeces and, ideally, in any contaminated food.

There is no treatment available or necessary for this illness.

What can I do to prevent Clostridium perfringens infection?

- Cook your food thoroughly. For big joints, it's best to rely on an oven thermometer, which only costs a few pounds. Although Clostridium perfringens food poisoning is not a particularly serious condition, there are a number of other, more serious conditions linked to undercooking of food. A thermometer will help prevent these as well.
- After cooking, if food is not to be eaten straight away, cool it rapidly. The aim is to get the temperature of the hot cooked food down as soon as possible to a level where the germs don't grow.

Don't be tempted to put freshly-cooked foods straight in the refrigerator. Instead, put the covered food in a cool place for no longer than 1 ½ hours before putting it in a clean refrigerator.