



## Food-borne illness: Information for consumers and food businesses

In Queensland, each year thousands of people suffer from illnesses associated with eating contaminated food.

The symptoms of food-borne illness may include: diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, fever and headaches. A person suffering a food-borne illness may have one or more of these symptoms. Symptoms are often the same as for 'gastro' type illnesses caused by other sources (other people carrying the bacteria, unhygienic surfaces, etc.), which can make it difficult to tell if the illness is caused by food or another source of illness.

The incubation period (the time between eating the food and the appearance of the first symptom) may be as long as 3-4 days. This means that the last meal consumed may not necessarily be the culprit. The duration of illness may also vary from 1-7 days. It is important to note that foods that cause food-borne illness will not necessarily look, taste or smell any different to safe food.

Many people have mild symptoms and recover within a few days. However, if symptoms persist for more than 3 days or are severe, medical advice should be sought.

### Information for consumers

If you reasonably suspect that a particular food business may be responsible for a food-borne illness, it is recommended that you:

- consult a doctor. The doctor will be able to provide any treatment that is necessary. It is important that a faecal (stool) specimen be taken, to assist with any investigation if the food business is suspected to be the cause of the food-borne illness
- keep any remaining portion of the suspected food refrigerated so that it may be tested if required
- advise the food business of the matter, including the type of food eaten, so they can deal with any remaining suspected food
- report the matter to the local Queensland Health Public Health Unit (contact details on page 3), particularly if a friend or associate is suffering similar symptoms associated with consumption of the same food. Any other associated cases should also be encouraged to consult a doctor and lodge their own complaint with the local Queensland Health Public Health Unit for investigation.

### Food handler responsibilities

The *Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, Food Safety Standards* require that food handlers advise their supervisor if they are suffering from a symptom of a food-borne illness. For further information on food handler responsibilities, see the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) fact sheet *Food Safety Standards – Health and hygiene: Responsibilities of food handlers*, which can be accessed from the FSANZ website at [www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au).

## Food business responsibilities

If a customer alleges that they have become ill as a result of consuming food from your food business, it is recommended to:

- suggest to the customer to consult a doctor. The doctor will be able to provide any necessary treatment
- separate any remaining portions of the suspected food so that it is not served to other customers. Ensure the remaining portion is kept refrigerated
- not dispose of any remaining portion of the suspected food in the event that testing is required. This may assist your food business in demonstrating the food suspected of causing the illness is not responsible.

If a staff member reports that they may be suffering a food-borne illness, it is important that they do not handle food until the symptoms of the food-borne illness have completely ceased. It is recommended that food handlers do not commence food handling activities until at least 48 hours has passed since their last symptom of food-borne illness.

## How to reduce the risk

### Personal Hygiene

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds and dry them with a clean towel before eating or preparing food.

Make sure you wash your hands thoroughly after:

- using the toilet
- smoking
- blowing your nose
- coughing or sneezing into hands
- cleaning surfaces
- disposing waste.

People with symptoms of food-borne disease especially vomiting or diarrhoea should not prepare food for others for 48 hours after the symptoms have finished.

### Storage

Raw meat, fish, poultry, and raw vegetables can contain large numbers of bacteria, and can cross-contaminate ready-to-eat food if they are not stored or handled carefully.

It is recommended to:

- store raw foods in covered or sealed containers below other ready-to-eat foods inside the refrigerator to prevent food parts and meat juice spilling or dripping on to other food
- cover foods before storage in the refrigerator, freezer, and cupboards to protect them from contamination
- wash hands immediately after handling raw foods and before handling cooked or ready-to-eat food
- do not wash meat such as raw chicken before cooking
- use different chopping boards, utensils, and plates for raw foods and ready-to-eat food. If the same chopping board or knife is used, ensure it is washed thoroughly in hot soapy water and dried before re-use
- thoroughly wash raw vegetables before preparation and eating
- store food items carefully away from toxic chemicals, insect sprays, cleaning agents, etc.
- not use cloth towels which have been used to wipe hands or benchtops for drying dishes. These should be washed and dried regularly
- regularly wash or replace dishcloths.

## Temperature control

Storing food at incorrect temperatures known as the 'temperature danger zone' i.e. above 5°C or below 60°C, can result in the multiplication of bacteria that cause food-borne illness.

Ensure that:

- refrigerators are kept below 5°C with adequate air flow around food to ensure even temperature distribution
- hot foods are kept above 60°C (i.e. 'steaming' hot)
- cooked foods are reheated rapidly until all parts of the food reach 75°C
- frozen foods are thawed in either the refrigerator or the microwave. The longer that raw food is left at room temperature the more quickly bacteria can multiply and toxins can form. Avoid thawing foods on the bench. Remember that while the inside of the food may still be frozen, the outside may have thawed and is already in the 'temperature danger zone'
- food is thoroughly cooked to kill germs.

## For further information

The Queensland Department of Health has a variety of fact sheets with detailed information on food safety. These can be accessed at [www.health.qld.gov.au/foodsafety](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/foodsafety).

If you have any further questions relating to food-borne illness, contact the Public Health Unit for the area where you are located. Contact details for Public Health Units are provided below.

### Public Health Units

Public Health Unit	Phone number	Public Health Unit	Phone number
Cairns and Hinterland	4226 5555	Metro South	3176 4000
Cape York	4226 5555	North West	4753 9000
Central Queensland	4920 6989	South West	4631 9888
Darling Downs	4631 9888	Sunshine Coast	5409 6600
Gold Coast	5668 3700	Townsville	4753 9000
Mackay	4911 0400	West Moreton	3413 1200
Metro North	3624 1111	Wide Bay	4150 2780