

Foodborne Illness & Outbreak Program

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is a foodborne illness?

A: According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), foodborne illness (sometimes called "foodborne disease," "foodborne infection," or "food poisoning") is a common, costly—yet preventable—public health problem. Each year, 1 in 6 Americans gets sick by consuming contaminated foods or beverages. Many different disease-causing microbes, or pathogens, can contaminate foods, so there are many different foodborne infections. In addition, poisonous chemicals, or other harmful substances can cause foodborne diseases if they are present in food.

- More than 250 different foodborne diseases have been described. Most of these diseases are infections, caused by a variety of bacteria, viruses, and parasites that can be foodborne.
- Other diseases are poisonings, caused by harmful toxins or chemicals that have contaminated the food, for example, poisonous mushrooms.
- These different diseases have many different symptoms. The microbe or toxin enters the body through the gastrointestinal tract, and often causes the first symptoms there, so nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and diarrhea are common symptoms in many foodborne diseases.
- For more information from the CDC on foodborne illnesses go to: <http://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/facts.html>

Q: What are the major causes of foodborne illness in the United States?

A: According to the Food and Drug Administration the 5 most common causes of foodborne illness are:

- Poor personal hygiene (inadequate hand washing or not staying home when you are sick).
- Food from unsafe sources (such as home canning or shellfish from contaminated waters).
- Inadequate cooking temperatures.
- Improper holding temperatures (keeping cold food at 41F or below and hot food at 135F or above).
- Contaminated equipment (cutting lettuce on the same cutting board as raw chicken),

Q: Why do we investigate foodborne illness complaints?

A: A complaint is the first indication that something may need to be improved in our food safety system. We rely on reports from the public as well as confirmed cases from physicians to take a closer look at facilities or processes that may need to be more tightly controlled. Complaints may indicate the beginning of an outbreak, which is investigated in order to control the outbreak and prevent additional cases of illness from occurring.

Q: What can I do to protect myself from foodborne illness at home?

A: Things to consider when cooking at home:

- Practice good hygiene. Ensure you wash your hands for at least 20 seconds before handling food, after using the restroom or changing a baby's diaper, after handling the family pet, after handling raw meat, or after taking out the trash.
- Cook meat, poultry and eggs thoroughly. Use a food thermometer to check temperatures of meat. Eggs should be cooked until the yolk is firm. http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/safe-food-handling/safe-minimum-internal-temperature-chart/ct_index
- Separate the raw and cooked foods. Make sure to use separate cutting boards, utensils, and platters for raw and cooked foods. Make sure to wash your hands after handling raw meat.
- Refrigerate left overs. Bacteria can grow quickly at room temperatures so divide large portions into smaller ones and refrigerate promptly.
Wash produce under running tap water including those with skins and rinds that are not eaten. Avoid cutting vegetables on surfaces where raw meat was handled.

Q: What should I do if I think I got sick after eating at a food establishment?

A: If you develop gastrointestinal symptoms (vomiting and/or diarrhea) after eating at a food establishment, call the health department at (775) 328-2434. A member of our clerical staff will take some basic information from you and forward it to the foodborne illness and outbreak team. We will call you back and conduct a detailed interview with you to fully investigate the complaint. Your cooperation is very important, as complaints are often the first indication of an outbreak.

We will ask you other questions such as: a 72 hour food history starting from time of onset of symptoms, travel history, and other possible exposures that may have contributed to your illness.

Q: Why do we ask ALL those questions?

A: We ask a lot of questions to try to determine all factors that may have contributed to your symptoms. Many times we think it is the last thing we ate that made us sick, but often bacteria and/or viruses need time to reproduce and the onset of symptoms can range from hours to days and even weeks. We also ask other places you have eaten because we may be investigating other complaints at other restaurants or facilities in our community. Public health is a team effort and we rely on reports from our citizens to alert us to possible outbreaks in the community.

Q: Do you test food?

A: The Washoe County Health District has no means of testing food for individuals. We only test food if there is an outbreak occurring and our staff will conduct the sampling as we have specific protocols that must be followed. Food testing can be difficult as outbreaks are often identified after food has been consumed and leftovers from the facility are not available to test.

Q: What should I do if I got sick after eating something I purchased at a grocery store (e.g. packaged cookies, chicken, salad mix, bag of candy, soda, etc.)?

- **A:** We recommend you contact our office to file a foodborne illness complaint in addition to the following: For meat or poultry products contact the USDA at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/how-file-complaint>
- For all other food products contact the FDA at <http://www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/>

Q: Where can I find more information about foodborne illnesses?

A: More info can be found at our [Communicable Disease Program](#). You can also look at the [Center for Disease Control](#)'s website or at the [FDA's Bad Bug Handbook](#). For more information on food safety on the web, visit the [Food Safety Inspection Service site](#).

Q: How do I know how a restaurant did on their inspection?

A: All of the inspections are public record and can be accessed at www.WashoeEats.com. The site provides access to review food safety practices at your favorite eateries and new restaurants for you to explore.