

Campylobacteriosis

Your questions answered

What is campylobacteriosis?

Campylobacteriosis is an infectious disease caused by bacteria of the genus *Campylobacter*, a spiral-shaped bacteria. Most people who become ill with campylobacteriosis get diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain and fever within two to five days after exposure to the organism. The diarrhea may be bloody and can be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. The illness typically lasts one week. Some infected persons do not have any symptoms. In persons with compromised immune systems, *Campylobacter* occasionally spreads to the bloodstream and causes a serious life-threatening infection.

How common is campylobacter?

Campylobacter is one of the most common causes of diarrheal illness in the United States. The vast majority of cases occur as isolated, sporadic events, not as part of recognized outbreaks.

About 13 cases are diagnosed each year for each 100,000 persons in the population. Many more cases go undiagnosed or unreported, and campylobacteriosis is estimated to affect more than 2.4 million persons every year or 0.8 percent of the population. Campylobacteriosis occurs much more frequently in the summer months than in the winter. Although *Campylobacter* does not commonly cause death, it has been estimated that approximately 124 persons with *Campylobacter* infections die each year.

How do people get infected with this germ?

Campylobacteriosis usually occurs in single, sporadic cases, but it can also occur in outbreaks, when a number of people become ill at one time. Most cases of campylobacteriosis are associated with eating raw or undercooked poultry meat or from cross-contamination of other foods by these items. Infants may get the infection by contact with poultry packages in shopping carts. Outbreaks of *Campylobacter* are usually associated with unpasteurized milk or contaminated water. Animals can also be infected and some people have acquired their infection from contact with the stool of an ill dog or cat. The organism is not usually spread from one person to another, but this can happen if the infected person is producing a large volume of diarrhea.

A very small number of *Campylobacter* organisms (fewer than 500) can cause illness in humans. Even one drop of juice from raw chicken meat can infect a person. One way to become infected is to cut poultry meat on a cutting board, and then use the unwashed cutting board or utensil to prepare vegetables or other raw or lightly cooked foods. The

What Can **YOU** Do?

Campylobacter organisms from the raw meat can thus spread to the other foods.

How is the infection diagnosed?

Many different kinds of infections can cause diarrhea and bloody diarrhea. Campylobacter infection is diagnosed when a culture of a stool specimen yields the organism.

How is campylobacteriosis treated?

Almost all persons infected with Campylobacter recover without any specific treatment. Patients should drink extra fluids as long as the diarrhea lasts. In more severe cases, antibiotics such as azithromycin or erythromycin can shorten the duration of symptoms if given early in the illness. Your doctor will decide whether antibiotics are necessary.

Are there long term consequences?

Most people who get campylobacteriosis recover completely within two to five days, although sometimes recovery can take up to 10 days. Rarely, Campylobacter infection results in long-term consequences. Some people develop arthritis. Others may develop a rare disease called Guillain-Barré syndrome that affects the nerves of the body beginning several weeks after the diarrheal illness.

What can be done to prevent Campylobacter infection?

- Cook all poultry and other meat products thoroughly. Make sure that the meat is cooked throughout (no longer pink) and any juices run clear. All poultry should be cooked to reach a minimum internal temperature of 165°F. If you are served undercooked poultry in a restaurant, send it back for further cooking.
- Wash hands with soap before preparing food, after handling raw foods of animal origin and before touching anything else.
- Prevent cross-contamination in the kitchen by using separate cutting boards for foods of animal origin and other foods and by carefully cleaning all cutting boards, countertops and utensils with soap and hot water after preparing raw food of animal origin.
- Avoid consuming unpasteurized milk and untreated surface water.
- Make sure that persons with diarrhea, especially children, wash their hands carefully and frequently with soap to reduce the risk of spreading the infection.
- Wash hands with soap after contact with pet feces.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation. If you have any questions about the disease described here or think that you may have an infection, consult with your health care provider. This fact sheet is based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Health and Safety topic fact sheets.

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For more information on campylobacteriosis, call the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department at (785) 843-0721 or visit us on the web at: www.ldchealth.org