

Campylobacter Fact Sheet

What is Campylobacter?

Campylobacter is the commonest cause of bacterial food poisoning in the UK.

What are the symptoms of Campylobacter?

The usual symptoms are:

- Severe stomach cramps,
- Severe diarrhoea,
- Sometimes vomiting and fever.

Symptoms can take quite a long time to develop, usually between two and five days although occasionally it can be as long as 10 days. The illness is very unpleasant, but patients usually recover without treatment in a few days. Antibiotic treatment is available for severe cases.

Where does Campylobacter come from?

Campylobacter bacteria occurs naturally in the guts of various farm, wild and domestic animals including pets and birds.

Any raw meat may be contaminated with Campylobacter. Poultry, especially chickens, often carry large numbers of these bacteria without showing any sign of illness. Most raw chickens on sale are contaminated with Campylobacter.

How do I catch Campylobacter?

By eating contaminated meat or poultry that is undercooked. Also by eating cooked or ready to eat foods that has been in contact with contaminated food, surfaces, equipment or utensils.

You need to swallow only a few Campylobacter bacteria to cause illness.

Unfortunately you cannot tell when foods are contaminated with Campylobacter, they look taste and smell normal.

How will I know if I have Campylobacter?

If you are ill with diarrhoea, you should visit your doctor who may ask you to provide a stool sample. This will be tested in a laboratory. The result will take a few days.

How can I avoid getting Campylobacter?

- Cook all meat thoroughly right through to the middle. Thorough cooking will readily kill Campylobacter bacteria.
- Handle raw meat as though harmful bacteria are present. Keep raw poultry and other types of meat separate from ready-to-eat foods. Wash all utensils and surfaces that have come into contact with raw meat after each use. Always wash your hands after touching raw meat and poultry.

- Always wash and dry your hands thoroughly after handling any animals including pets especially before eating or drinking. Also take care to wash your hands after activities such as visiting farms or working in the garden.
- Do not drink water from lakes, rivers, streams etc., which can become contaminated with Campylobacter from wild and domestic animals. You should try not to swallow water when taking part in water activities.
- Do not drink raw (unpasteurised) milk. Raw milk is sometimes sold or used on farms and cattle, sheep and goats, which carry Campylobacter, can easily contaminate their raw milk. Also birds pecking through milk bottle foil tops can contaminate doorstep deliveries so make sure your bottles are protected.

What special care should I take if I have Campylobacter?

Good personal hygiene is important. Washing and drying your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet and before preparing food will reduce the risk of passing the illness to other people.

How long should I stay away from work, school or nursery?

- Most adults and children over five years should stay away from work until they are feeling better.
- People working with food must stay off work until they have been symptom free for two days. You must tell your employer about your illness.
- People working with vulnerable groups e.g. the young, elderly or those in poor health, must tell their employer about the illness and must stay off work until they have been symptom free for two days.
- Young children should stay away from playgroups, childminders or nursery school until they have been symptom free for two days.

Who cares if I have Campylobacter?

Your GP and your local Environmental Health Officer do.

Your GP will give you advice about the medical aspects of Campylobacter. Your local Environmental Health Officer may also contact you and offer advice and ask some questions to try to see where the illness has come from.

For further information and advice, please contact:

Department: Environmental Health Department

Phone: 020 8547 5002

e-mail: environmental.health@rbk.kingston.gov.uk

Address: Guildhall, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, KT1 1EU

Website: www.kingston.gov.uk