

# Fact Sheet

March 2010

## Campylobacter Infection

### What is Campylobacter?

Campylobacter is a bacteria found mainly in animals such as chickens and cows. In humans, it is a common cause of diarrhea and/or stomach illness (often referred to as gastroenteritis), and is linked to contaminated food or water.

### What are the symptoms of Campylobacter infection?

Symptoms include fever, headache and muscle pains followed by diarrhea, cramping and stomach pain. These symptoms usually occur within two to five days after being infected with Campylobacter. Diarrhea may be bloody and can be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. The illness typically lasts one week. Some people can be infected but do not have any symptoms. In people with a weak immune system, Campylobacter can sometimes spread to the bloodstream and cause a serious infection. Death from this infection is very rare.

### How is Campylobacter spread?

It is very rare for an infected individual to pass Campylobacter to another person. Infection usually comes from eating food or water contaminated with this bacteria. Bacteria from contaminated food such as uncooked chicken can get onto other foods in your kitchen through contact with cutting boards or utensils that were not cleaned between use. Campylobacter can also come from the stool of sick pets, including cats and dogs. Outbreaks can occur from contaminated food and also from improperly treated drinking water contaminated with manure containing Campylobacter.

### How is Campylobacter diagnosed?

The signs and symptoms of Campylobacter look like those of other bacterial infections which cause stomach problems. Campylobacter infection can only be confirmed through lab testing of stool samples.

### How is Campylobacter infection treated?

Most individuals recover from their infection without medical treatment. Drink extra fluids if you have diarrhea to prevent dehydration. For more serious infections, check with your health care provider who may prescribe antibiotics.

### What are the possible complications of Campylobacter infection?

Complications from Campylobacter infection are rare and generally occur one to two weeks after infection. Painful swelling of the joints (known as arthritis), particularly of the ankles, knees, wrists and joints of the hands and feet, can occur after Campylobacter infection in approximately one to five percent of patients. Guillain-Barré syndrome, a progressive weakening of the body's muscles usually starting with the legs, occurs even less frequently (about 1 in 1,000 Campylobacter cases) but can lead to hospitalization and the need for intensive care. Muscle weakness from Guillain-Barré syndrome can lead to paralysis that lasts several weeks and full recovery may take months. Other complications include urinary tract infections, infection of the blood (sepsis) or infection of the lining of the brain (meningitis).

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## **What can be done to prevent the spread of Campylobacter infection?**

There are a number of steps you can take to protect yourself and those around you:

- Keep raw foods cold until they are to be cooked. Refrigerate or freeze raw poultry and meat immediately after purchase
- Prevent cross-contamination: separate raw meat and poultry from ready-to-eat foods at all times, including in the shopping cart, grocery bags, refrigerator and during preparation
- Do not wash raw poultry. Washing poultry can result in cross-contamination in the kitchen,
- Wash your hands after handling and preparing raw meat and poultry, changing diapers, after petting cats, dogs and farm animals and remind your children to wash their hands frequently and thoroughly
- Clean using soap and water and then sanitize all utensils and work surfaces with a mild bleach solution (5 ml/1 tsp. bleach per 750 ml/3 cups water). Consider using a plastic cutting board. Place it in the dishwasher to disinfect
- Drink only pasteurized milk
- Drink water from a safe supply. If you drink water from a well, have it tested to ensure it is safe
- Use a food thermometer to cook foods to a safe internal temperature. Ensure that chicken is cooked thoroughly throughout and any juices run clear
- Do not prepare food for others if you have diarrhea.

## **What is the role of Toronto Public Health in investigating Campylobacter?**

Individuals residing in Ontario who test positive for Campylobacter must be reported to their local health department by either the lab or their health care provider. In Toronto, residents who are infected with Campylobacter will be reported to Toronto Public Health. Toronto Public Health will send a notice to you asking for additional information about your illness to help determine the source of your infection. This information can be helpful in ensuring that contaminated food or water does not cause illness to other people.

## **Where can I get more information about Campylobacter?**

Call Toronto Public Health at 416-338-7600, TTY at 416-392-0658 or speak to your health care provider.