

April, 2009

Food Safety and Foodborne Illness in Toronto

Where do foodborne illnesses come from?

Micro-organisms like bacteria, viruses and parasites are the most common causes of foodborne illnesses. Raw or undercooked foods such as raw chicken, shellfish and unwashed fruits or vegetables are the most common source of foodborne illness. Food served in any setting can become contaminated - at home, in restaurants, hospitals, at school, while travelling, etc.

What are the symptoms of foodborne illness?

Symptoms of illness range from an upset stomach to more serious symptoms, including diarrhea, fever, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and dehydration. Symptoms can start within hours or days of eating contaminated food, and usually last for one to three days. Most symptoms resolve without medical treatment. For some people, especially the elderly, young children, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems, symptoms of foodborne illness can be more serious.

Under provincial legislation, all cases of foodborne illness must be reported to the local Medical Officer of Health by a laboratory, or health care professional.

Who is most at risk from serious illness related to foodborne illnesses?

Children under the age of five are at highest risk of having an isolated case of foodborne illness and also experience more severe illness. Older individuals are at increased risk but are more often affected during outbreaks in institutional settings, such as hospitals and long-term care homes.

How can foodborne illnesses be prevented?

Most cases of foodborne illness can be prevented through proper cooking or handling of food and proper hand washing, particularly before food preparation and after using the bathroom or changing diapers.

Some other ways of preventing foodborne illnesses include:

- Avoid preparing food if you are vomiting or have diarrhea.
- Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood, and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods during storage and preparation.
- Always rinse produce thoroughly before eating or cooking.
- Keep separate cutting boards for raw meats and vegetables.
- Clean surfaces thoroughly before and after preparing food.
- Cook foods properly and at a high enough temperature to kill harmful bacteria.

- Refrigerate foods promptly after cooking. Cold temperatures will help keep harmful bacteria from growing and multiplying.
- Avoid consuming raw, unpasteurized milk and milk products.
- Never eat foods from cans that are leaking, dented or have bulging ends.
- Do not eat foods past their expiry date.
- You can't tell if a food is contaminated by looking at it. When in doubt, throw it out.

Are reports of foodborne illness increasing or decreasing?

The number of sporadic cases of foodborne illness has decreased in the past ten years with about 1,750 cases reported each year, a reduction of 30 percent since 2002. However, the vast majority of cases are not reported. Toronto Public Health's report on Food Safety and Foodborne Illness in Toronto estimates that there are 437,000 cases annually, which means one in every six Toronto residents will experience a foodborne illness every year. Each reported case represents 227 cases that are not reported.

How was the number of unreported cases calculated?

TPH used methods developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada to calculate and correct for the under-reporting of foodborne illness by projecting an estimated total based on cases reported to physicians, laboratories and public health units.

What is Toronto Public Health doing to ensure food is as safe as possible?

TPH inspects approximately 16,000 food premises every year. Since the launch of the DineSafe restaurant inspection and disclosure program in 2001, the number of food establishments that pass their first inspection has increased dramatically. Inspection results are posted at the front entrance of food establishments, and are updated daily on the DineSafe website www.toronto.ca/fooddisclosure. If you have a concern about a food premise, or for details on inspection results, call 416-338-FOOD (3663).

TPH is also one of very few municipalities with a mandatory Food Handler Certification Program, requiring at least one certified food handler (at the supervisory level) to be on site when food is prepared, processed, served, packaged, or stored. To date, 22,278 food handlers have been certified by TPH.

Public health investigators follow-up on all reported cases or suspect cases of foodborne illness from food premises, including schools, restaurants, and institutions such as long-term care homes and hospitals.

TPH also works to distribute food safety information to the public.

For more information, and copies of the Food Safety and Foodborne Illness in Toronto reports, visit: toronto.ca/health.