



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Boston Public Health Commission
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Campylobacter

What is Campylobacter?

Campylobacter is bacteria that can infect the bowel in people and animals. The disease it causes (called “campylobacteriosis”) is one of the most common types of infection of the bowel in the United States. Most people infected with campylobacter do not have serious medical problems. However, in rare cases the infection can spread to other parts of the body such as the blood.

What are the symptoms of campylobacteriosis?

The most common symptoms are diarrhea (sometimes bloody), abdominal pain, tiredness, fever, nausea, and vomiting. These symptoms can start within one to ten days, but most often will show up within two to five days after the germs have been swallowed. In otherwise healthy people, the symptoms usually last one to four days, but sometimes longer. If you have any of these symptoms, see your health care provider.

How is campylobacter spread?

The campylobacter germ must be swallowed to cause disease. This usually happens when someone eats food that has been contaminated with campylobacter and has not been well cooked or pasteurized (treated to kill germs). It also can happen if someone drinks contaminated water. Campylobacter is found in the stool (feces) of infected people and some animals. Campylobacteriosis can be spread from one person to another if an infected person prepares food for other people without thoroughly washing his or her hands after using the toilet. The infection sometimes spreads in day-care centers and other institutions because very young children and disabled adults may not always be able to wash their hands well. People can also be infected by their pets, especially puppies and kittens.

What kinds of food are most likely to be contaminated?

Campylobacter is most commonly found in uncooked food products from animals, such as poultry (chicken, turkey, etc.), and in unpasteurized milk. However, thorough cooking or pasteurizing will kill the bacteria and make these foods safe to eat.

Can campylobacter be spread by animals?

Yes. Campylobacter has been found in the stool (feces) of infected farm animals and pets (including cattle, poultry, cats and dogs), even if they appear healthy. The bacteria have also been found in different kinds of wild animals. Therefore, you should wash your hands well with soap and water after touching animals or their stools.

How is campylobacteriosis diagnosed and treated?

A stool sample must be sent to a laboratory by your health care provider. It takes several days to get the results from the test. Most people get well without any treatment, but some people can get very sick. If you think you or someone in your family has this disease, see a health care provider as soon as you can. People who are at risk for getting very sick, for being sick for longer than usual, or whose work or living situations make it likely that their infection will spread to others, are usually treated with antibiotics.

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How can you prevent campylobacteriosis?

The two most important things to remember are that the germ can only make you sick if you swallow it and that thorough cooking will kill it. Be extra careful when using food products from animals.

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before eating, before handling food, after using the toilet, after changing diapers and after handling your pets or cleaning up after them.
- Cook all food from animal sources thoroughly, especially poultry. If the meat or poultry is still pink in the center, it is not thoroughly cooked.
- Use only clean utensils, dishes and cutting boards to prepare food that is already cooked or will be eaten raw (such as salad).
- Anything you use to prepare raw meat, seafood, or poultry, including your hands and the table or counter top, should be washed thoroughly before you touch any other food.
- Do not drink unpasteurized milk or eat anything made with unpasteurized milk (such as cheese).
- Do not drink from untreated water supplies when you go camping or hiking.
- If you are taking care of someone who has campylobacteriosis or diarrhea, scrub your hands with plenty of soap and water after cleaning the bathroom, helping the person use the toilet, or changing diapers, soiled clothes or soiled sheets.
- If you or your child has persistent diarrhea (with or without a fever), or if the diarrhea is very bad, call your doctor or health center for advice.

Are there any health regulations for people with campylobacteriosis?

Yes. Because campylobacteriosis is a disease that can easily spread to other people, health care providers are required by law to report cases of campylobacteriosis to the local board of health. In Boston, cases should be reported to the Boston Public Health Commission.

In order to protect the public, workers at food-related businesses who have campylobacteriosis must stay out of work until they don't have diarrhea and one lab test on a stool sample shows that there are no campylobacter germs. Food-related businesses include restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, supermarkets, dairy or food-processing plants. This regulation also includes workers in schools, residential programs, day-care and health facilities who feed, give mouth care or dispense medications to clients.

**For more information, please contact
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