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SALMONELLA

What is salmonella?

Salmonella bacteria cause food poisoning. Symptoms include diarrhoea, stomach cramps and sometimes vomiting and fever. Most people recover without treatment, but if you become seriously ill you may need hospital care because the dehydration (fluid loss) caused by the illness can be life-threatening.

Who gets salmonella?

Anyone can get salmonella, but young children, the elderly and people who have immune systems that are not working properly (including people with cancer, AIDS or alcoholism) have a greater risk of becoming severely ill.

How do you get infected with salmonella?

You usually get salmonella by eating contaminated food. Salmonella bacteria live in the gut of many farm animals and can affect meat, eggs, poultry, and milk. Other foods like green vegetables, fruit and shellfish can become contaminated through contact with manure in the soil or sewage in the water.

Contamination is also possible if raw and cooked foods are stored together. Most tortoises and terrapins and other pet reptiles can also carry salmonella. Dogs, cats, and rodents can occasionally become infected.

It is impossible to tell from its appearance whether food is contaminated with salmonella. It will look, smell and taste normal.

Salmonella can be spread from person to person by poor hygiene, by failing to wash your hands properly after going to the toilet, or after handling contaminated food.

How can you avoid getting infected with salmonella?

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water:

- before preparing and eating food
- after handling raw food
- after going to the toilet or changing a baby's nappy
- after contact with pets and other animals, especially reptiles and amphibians
- after working in the garden

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Keep cooked food away from raw food

Store raw foods below cooked or ready-to-eat foods in the fridge to prevent contamination.

Wash raw fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating.

Cook food thoroughly, especially meat, so that it is piping hot

Keep all kitchen surfaces and equipment including knives, chopping boards and dish cloths clean

Do not drink untreated water from lakes, rivers or streams

Do not keep reptiles or amphibians in households where there is a child under 1 year of age, or someone with poor immunity eg being treated for cancer.

If someone has salmonella, wash all dirty clothes, bedding and towels in the washing machine on the hottest cycle possible. Clean toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins after use with detergent and hot water, followed by a household disinfectant.

What are the symptoms of salmonella and how long do they last?

Symptoms include diarrhoea, stomach cramps and sometimes vomiting and fever. On average, it takes from 12 to 72 hours for the symptoms to develop after swallowing an infectious dose of salmonella. Symptoms usually last for four to seven days and clear up without treatment. You may need treatment if you become dehydrated.

How do you treat salmonella?

It is important to drink plenty of fluids as diarrhoea or vomiting can lead to dehydration and you can lose important sugars and minerals from your body. Your doctor may recommend a re-hydration solution, available from your pharmacist.

- If you feel sick, try taking small sips of fluid, frequently.
- Avoid tea, coffee, carbonated drinks or alcohol.
- Always dilute sugary drinks even if you would not normally dilute them.
- A simple painkiller like paracetamol can help combat any pain

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Sometimes severe cases are treated with antibiotics. If you are given antibiotics it is essential that you complete the course as prescribed

Do you need to stay off work?

Yes. While you are ill and have symptoms you are infectious. Adults should stay away from work for 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

You should tell your employer you have had salmonella if you work with vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the young, those in poor health, or if you handle food.

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