



# Food Poisoning: What It Is and How to Report It in Massachusetts

## **What is food poisoning?**

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Food poisoning is also known as foodborne illness. It occurs when someone becomes ill after eating a food or drinking a beverage that is contaminated with a harmful substance.

## **Is it a significant problem?**

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The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that there are 76 million cases of food poisoning in the U.S. each year. While most cases result in no serious illness or injury, every year there are an estimated 300,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths. Even the non-serious illnesses can result in physical discomfort, inconvenience, and financial loss.

## **What causes food poisoning?**

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Not all food poisoning is the same. Food poisoning can occur when food becomes contaminated with harmful substances such as bacteria, viruses, parasites, toxins and chemicals. Some of these substances can cause illness within minutes, while others may take several hours, days or even weeks to make someone sick. Therefore, it is not always the last thing consumed that causes an illness. The contaminated food may actually have been eaten several days before the illness began.

## **What are the symptoms?**

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There is no single set of food poisoning symptoms. The most common symptoms are vomiting, diarrhea, nausea and stomach cramps. Fever, headache, chills, muscle aches and dizziness may also occur. In fact, if you experience vomiting or diarrhea, food poisoning is always a possibility, although it is not the only cause of such symptoms. Food poisoning can also cause unusual symptoms such as irregular heartbeat, difficulty breathing, and paralysis. If someone you shared a meal with is having similar symptoms at the same time that you are, it is even more likely that you are both suffering from food poisoning.

## **What should I do?**

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**You should consult a doctor for advice on whether medical treatment is needed.** Many types of food poisonings are short-lived. Many people will get better without treatment. However, it is always advisable to seek medical advice if you have any concerns about the seriousness of your illness.

If you do see a doctor, you may be asked to provide a stool sample. For many types of foodborne illnesses, a stool test is needed to confirm the diagnosis. As soon as you can,

you should call your local board of health or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to report the suspect food poisoning.

### **Who is at risk?**

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The effects of a food poisoning are usually more severe among young children, the elderly, pregnant women, people with liver disease, and anyone whose immune systems has become weakened because of disease or its treatment.

### **How do I report a foodborne illness?**

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If you think you or someone you know has experienced food poisoning, there are several ways you can report the incident. You can call:

- the local health department in the town in which the suspect food was eaten or purchased,
- the health department in the Massachusetts community in which you live,
- the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Food Protection Program at **617-983-6700**, or
- the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at **617-983-6800**.

Be prepared to answer some questions. The interview may take 10-15 minutes to complete. You will be asked to give as many details as you can about the ill person(s) and what they ate during the **72 hours** before getting ill. A 72-hour food history is important. Many of the harmful substances that cause food poisoning take several days to cause illness. For example, Salmonella bacteria typically take 12-72 hours to make you ill. You will be asked to describe the symptoms experienced, the time the symptoms started, how long they lasted and whether a doctor was seen. You may also be asked about recent travel, pet ownership and exposure to drinking and recreational water. **Note: If you have questions or concerns about your health, you should contact a doctor.**

### **Do I need to give my name?**

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You will be asked to give your name and the names, addresses and phone numbers of all the ill people. You do not have to give out any names, if you do not wish. The more information you provide, the easier it is for health agents to do the necessary follow-up. **All information you give will be kept strictly confidential.** The information will be shared only with public health officials who are conducting the follow-up investigation. Identities of ill people will not be disclosed to the food establishment nor anyone else without permission.

### **What is the health department's role?**

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The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, in partnership with federal and local health agencies, works to protect the food supply by enforcing food safety regulations through regular inspections and investigations of complaints.

Reports of suspected and confirmed foodborne illnesses are recorded and tracked. If a pattern is found, an investigation is begun. The goal is to identify the source of the illness so that steps can be taken to stop the contamination and prevent more cases of illness.

### **How is my complaint followed-up?**

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The health department in the town in which you purchased the suspect food is responsible for following-up on the complaint. A health agent will review the 72-hour food history. If the information you give points to an establishment, the health inspector will start an investigation by visiting the food establishment and reviewing the food handling practices, including how the foods you ate were prepared.

Investigators from the state health department will often assist the local health agents. The state investigators work with the local health agents to discover the causes of outbreaks and put in place procedures to prevent future outbreaks. The investigation may include collecting stool samples for testing from employees and ill patrons. Food samples may also be collected for analyses. Sometimes a food history questionnaire is sent out to patrons and employees to help determine which food(s) made people ill.

### **What should I do if I have any of the suspect food left over?**

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If there is suspect food left over, store it in the refrigerator. Keep it in the original container. If that is not possible, put the food into a clean container or plastic bag. Make sure everyone in the household knows *not* to eat the suspect food. When you report the illness to the health department, report that there is left over food. **Not all food samples will be analyzed by the health department.**

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

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#### **FDA Bad Bug Book**

<http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/%7Emow/intro.html>

#### **FDA The Unwelcome Dinner Guest: Preventing Foodborne Illness:**

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fdunwelc.html>

#### **FDA Foodborne Illness page**

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/foodborn.html>

#### **Massachusetts Department of Public Health's website**

[www.mass.gov/dph/fpp/foodborneillness](http://www.mass.gov/dph/fpp/foodborneillness)

Food Protection Program  
Bureau of Environmental Health  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health  
305 South Street  
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

Phone: 617-983-6700  
TTY: 617-624-5286  
Fax: 617-983-6770  
Emergency After-hours Phone Number  
617-522-3700  
Web: <http://mass.gov/dph/fpp>

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