

# Campylobacteriosis

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is campylobacteriosis?

Campylobacteriosis (kamp-ill-oh-bak-teer-ee-oh-sis) is an intestinal infection caused by *Campylobacter* bacteria. Most human illness is caused by one species, called *Campylobacter jejuni*, but 1% of human campylobacteriosis cases are caused by other species of the bacteria.

### How is campylobacteriosis spread?

A person becomes infected with *Campylobacter* by swallowing the bacteria. This occurs when a person eats or drinks food or water contaminated with *Campylobacter* bacteria. Animals can also be infected, and pets, such as puppies and kittens with diarrhea, can spread the bacteria to people. *Campylobacter* can be found in the intestines of farm animals such as cattle, pigs and chicken.

Most cases of campylobacteriosis are associated with handling raw poultry or eating raw or undercooked poultry meat. As little as one drop of juice from raw chicken meat can be enough to infect a person. One way to become infected with *Campylobacter* is to cut poultry meat on a cutting board, and then use the unwashed cutting board or utensil to prepare vegetables or other raw or lightly cooked foods. The *Campylobacter* bacteria from the raw meat can then spread to the other foods.

The bacteria are not typically spread from person to person. Although outbreaks due to *Campylobacter* are infrequent, large outbreaks due to *Campylobacter* are usually related to drinking unpasteurized milk or contaminated water.

### Who gets campylobacteriosis?

Anyone can be infected with the *Campylobacter* bacteria. *Campylobacter* is one of the most common causes of bacterial diarrheal illness in the United States. Many cases go undiagnosed or unreported, but campylobacteriosis is estimated to affect over one million people every year. New Jersey reports an average of 500 laboratory-confirmed cases of campylobacteriosis each year. Campylobacteriosis is more common in the summer months than in the winter. Although *Campylobacter* does not commonly cause death, it has been estimated that about 100 people with *Campylobacter* infections may die each year.

### What are the symptoms of campylobacteriosis?

Most people who become ill with campylobacteriosis get mild to severe diarrhea (sometimes bloody), cramping, abdominal pain, and fever. The illness typically lasts 7 to 10 days. Many people infected with *Campylobacter* do not have any symptoms at all. In people with weak immune systems, *Campylobacter* sometimes spreads to the bloodstream and causes a serious life-threatening infection.

Symptoms usually start 2 to 5 days after swallowing the bacteria.

### How is campylobacteriosis diagnosed?

Many different kinds of infections can cause diarrhea. If a health care provider suspects campylobacteriosis, samples of the patient's stool will be examined.

## **What is the treatment for campylobacteriosis?**

Most people infected with *Campylobacter* will recover on their own without treatment. Sick people should drink lots of fluids while they have diarrhea to prevent dehydration. In more severe cases, antibiotics such as erythromycin or a fluoroquinolone can be used, and can shorten the duration of symptoms if they are given early in the illness. (NOTE – it is very important to finish your antibiotics, even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

## **Can people with campylobacteriosis pass the illness to others?**

An infected person can spread campylobacteriosis to others as long as the *Campylobacter* bacteria are being passed in his/her stool. This usually lasts from several days to several weeks after the symptoms of illness have ended.

## **Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

People who are vomiting or have diarrhea due to campylobacteriosis should remain home from work or school until those symptoms have ended.

Infected people must remember to carefully wash their hands with soap and water after every bathroom visit. Food-handlers, patient care givers (such as nurses) and those who provide care for young children (such as child care workers) should not work while they have symptoms. Young children who attend child care should be kept at home while they have diarrhea. Consult your local health department for further advice in these situations.

## **What can be done to prevent campylobacteriosis?**

- Cook all poultry products thoroughly. Make sure that the meat is cooked throughout (no pink in the center), any juices run clear, and the inside is cooked to 170°F (77° C) for breast meat, and 180° F (82° C) for thigh meat.
- If you are served undercooked poultry in a restaurant, send it back for further cooking.
- Wash hands with soap **before** handling raw foods of animal origin. Wash hands with soap **after** handling raw foods of animal origin and before touching anything else.
- Avoid drinking unpasteurized milk and untreated surface water.

## **General steps to prevent the spread of germs in the kitchen:**

- Raw meats should be kept away from fruits, vegetables, cooked food and all ready-to-eat foods.
- Use separate cutting boards for meats and other foods. Carefully clean all cutting boards, counter tops and utensils with soap and hot water after preparing raw meat, eggs or seafood.
- Wash your hands carefully after handling uncooked foods. Hands should be washed between handling different food items.
- Wash your hands with soap after touching animals or their droppings.
- Anyone with diarrhea should not prepare food for others.

**Where can I get more information?**

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- The NJ Department of Health [www.nj.gov/health](http://www.nj.gov/health)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [www.cdc.gov/campylobacter](http://www.cdc.gov/campylobacter)

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.