

Food Safety & Cancer Treatment

Why should cancer patients be concerned with food borne illness?

Foodborne illness, also called food poisoning, occurs when you eat food that contains pathogens, such as bacteria, parasites, or viruses, or the toxins they produce. It can be severe and sometimes life threatening, especially for people living with cancer who have weakened immune systems.

What causes foodborne illness?

Raw foods are a common cause of foodborne illness. Washing foods before preparation will remove bacteria. Proper cooking destroys bacteria, but they can grow on cooked food if it is left unrefrigerated too long. Some bacteria can even grow on food in the refrigerator if it is stored for too long. In addition, foods can become contaminated when someone with an infection handles it.

Talk with your health care team to learn which foods you should avoid during periods when your immune system is weakened.

Common pathogens that cause foodborne illness include *Listeria*, *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Norovirus*, *Clostridium perfringens*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Vibrio vulnificus*, and *Toxoplasma*.

What are the symptoms of foodborne illness?

Symptoms differ depending on the pathogen that causes the illness. Most often, symptoms include diarrhea, stomach pain or cramps, nausea, vomiting, and fever. Some people experience a headache and muscle pains, as well. Symptoms may begin as soon as a few hours after eating contaminated food, or they may begin 10 or more days later. With most foodborne illnesses, people start feeling sick within the first day or two after infection.

How can foodborne illness be prevented?

Avoid food that has a high risk of causing foodborne illness, and take care handling, preparing, and storing food. Simple food safety steps include washing your hands frequently, avoiding water from wells or boiling well water, thoroughly washing all fruits and vegetables, keeping raw meat and its juice away from other food, cleaning tools and surfaces that have been exposed to raw meat, thawing food properly, cooking food to the recommended internal temperatures, refrigerating or freezing perishable food within recommended time guidelines, and disposing of old food. If you have neutropenia, avoid eating out or eating takeout. Avoid buffets and community eating.

How is foodborne illness treated?

People with cancer are at increased risk of severe illness. Call your doctor immediately if you think you have a foodborne illness because early treatment is important. Stay hydrated. Treatment for severe foodborne illness may involve giving fluids intravenously (through a vein). In addition, your doctor may recommend medication to control severe diarrhea or antibiotics for certain types of bacterial infections.



Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important for making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- Am I at increased risk for getting a serious foodborne illness? If so, how long will this increased risk last?
- What steps should I take to prevent foodborne illness?
- Which types of food require special preparation to prevent foodborne illness?
- Which types of food should I avoid while my immune system is weakened? How long should I avoid them?
- What are the symptoms of foodborne illness?
- Whom should I contact if I think I have a foodborne illness?
- What treatment do you recommend for my foodborne illness?
- How can I prevent dehydration?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Find more information about managing the side effects of foodborne illness, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, at www.cancer.net/sideeffects. For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

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2318 Mill Road, Suite 800, Alexandria, VA 22314 | Toll Free: 888-651-3038 | Phone: 571-483-1300
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WORDS TO KNOW

Danger zone:

The range of temperature between 40°F and 140°F (4°C and 60°C) in which bacteria grow most rapidly

Dehydration:

A condition that occurs when a person does not take in enough fluid or loses too much fluid

Diarrhea:

Frequent, loose, or watery bowel movements

Disinfectant:

A substance used to kill organisms that could cause disease

Cross-contamination:

The process of transferring harmful substances between food, surfaces, and equipment

Immune system:

The organs and cells in a person's body that recognize and fight infections

Neutropenia:

A low level of neutrophils, which are a type of white blood cell, that increases the risk of dangerous infections

Pasteurization:

The process of heating food to a temperature that will destroy organisms that could cause disease

Pathogens:

Organisms that cause disease, such as bacteria, viruses, or parasites

Perishable:

Food that may spoil unless stored properly

Raw:

Uncooked

Sanitization:

The process of removing any organisms that could cause disease

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