

Food poisoning is caused by disease-carrying bacteria, either present in food and water or transferred by humans. It results from an “overdose” of the germs or the toxins (poison) produced by the germs in food. In both cases the food may look quite wholesome and appetising. Most food poisoning outbreaks have been attributed to three types of bacteria contamination:

- Staphylococcus Aureus
- Salmonella; and
- Clostridium Perfringens.

1 **STAPHYLOCOCCUS AUREUS** lives in human hands (even clean ones), hair and inside noses and throats. There is a risk of contaminating food even from newly washed hands. The risk is even greater from dirty hands, sneezing, coughing, boils, cuts and flies. The bacteria grows in food and produces a toxin which cannot be tasted. If the food is then heated, the staphylococcus may be killed but the toxin remains and can still cause illness.

Staphylococcus multiplies rapidly on cooked meats like ham and chicken, and on custards, prepared salads and sandwich fillings, if they are left at room temperature – the danger zone. Handle food as little as possible – use tongs.

2 **SALMONELLA** live in the bodies of most warm-blooded animals and are often found in raw chicken, meat and in eggs. Unless care is taken, salmonella is spread from raw food to cooked food by cross contamination, for example using the same chopping board for raw and cooked chicken. These foods should be cooked thoroughly to kill this type of bacteria.

If reheating cooked food, make sure it gets hotter than 60°C or more, as preventing cross-contamination removes the risk of this type of food poisoning.

3 **CLOSTRIDIUM PERFRINGENS** grows rapidly in stews, large joints and meat and gravies, if they are allowed to cool slowly after cooking. This germ is very heat resistant and food may still be contaminated after boiling for two hours. To stop bacterial growth, divide the food into small portions and cool as quickly as possible. Clostridium grows faster than the others and may double in number as often as every 12 minutes.

Disclaimer

This Fact Sheet was believed to be correct at the date of its approval.

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