

**Massachusetts Department of Public Health  
Division of Food and Drugs  
Division of Epidemiology and Immunization**

## **FOODBORNE ILLNESS: WHAT IS IT AND HOW TO REPORT IT**

**To Report a Suspect Foodborne Illness in Massachusetts, call**

- ❖ the local board of health in the town where the suspect food was purchased, or
- ❖ the local board of health in the town where you live, (you can find phone numbers of local boards of health at [www.mhoa.com](http://www.mhoa.com) or in the phone book) or
- ❖ the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Division of Food and Drugs at 617-983-6712, or
- ❖ the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800.

### **What is foodborne illness?**

Foodborne illness is commonly known as food poisoning. It occurs when someone becomes ill after eating a food or beverage that is contaminated with a harmful substance.

### **Is foodborne illness a significant problem?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that there are 76,000,000 cases of foodborne illness in the United States each year. While most cases result in no serious illness or injury, there are an estimated 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths every year. Even the non-serious illnesses, however, can result in much discomfort, inconvenience and financial loss.

### **What causes foodborne illness?**

Not all foodborne illnesses are the same. Foodborne illness can occur when food becomes contaminated with harmful substances such as bacteria, viruses, parasites, natural 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 eaten which causes an illness. The bad food may actually have been eaten several days before the illness began.

### **What are the symptoms of foodborne illness?**

The most common symptoms of foodborne illness are vomiting and/or diarrhea. Nausea and stomach cramps are also common. Fever, headache, chills, muscle aches and dizziness may also occur. In fact, if you experience vomiting or diarrhea, foodborne illness is always a possibility, although it is not the only cause of such symptoms. Foodborne illness can also cause unusual symptoms such as irregular heartbeat, flushing of the skin, paralysis, and difficulty breathing. 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 a foodborne illness.

## What should I do if I suspect I have a foodborne illness?

**You should consult a doctor for advice on whether medical treatment is needed.** Many foodborne illnesses are relatively short-lived. Many people will get better without treatment. However, it is always advisable to consult a doctor if you have any concerns about the seriousness of your illness. Young children, the elderly and immunocompromised people are more likely than others to experience severe illness. If you do see a doctor, you may be asked to provide a stool sample for testing. For many 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 foodborne illness.

## How do I report a foodborne illness?

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

- ❖ the local board of health in the town in which the suspect food was eaten or purchased, or
- ❖ the local board of health in the town in which you live,  
(You can find phone numbers of local boards of health at [www.mhoa.com](http://www.mhoa.com) or in the phone book) or
- ❖ the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Division of Food and Drugs at 617-983-6712, 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 as long as 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. It is not always the last thing you ate that made you ill. Many of the substances that cause foodborne illness take several days to cause illness. For example, Salmonella bacteria typically take 12 to 72 hours to make you ill. You will also be asked to describe the symptoms you experienced. You will be asked about 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?

You will be asked to give your name and the names, addresses and phone numbers of all the ill people as well. You do not have to give out any names if you do not wish to. 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 only be shared with public health officials who are conducting the follow-up investigation. Identities of ill people will not be disclosed to the food establishment or anyone else without permission.

## What is the role of the health departments in preventing foodborne illness?

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health works with federal agencies and 336 local health departments to ensure a safe food supply for Massachusetts. Health agents and food inspectors

work to protect the food supply by enforcing food safety regulations through regular inspections and investigations of complaints.

In addition, health departments track reports of suspect foodborne illness and reports of confirmed foodborne illnesses. Confirmed illnesses are those in which a person has visited a doctor and has tested positive for a foodborne disease agent. The state health department reviews such reports regularly to look for patterns and groups of complaints and/or illness. If a pattern is found, an investigation is begun. The goal is to identify the source of the illnesses so that the necessary steps can be taken to stop the contamination and prevent more cases of illness.

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

The local 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 that you provided. If the information you give points to an establishment, the health inspector from that town will start an investigation. The inspector will visit the food establishment and review food handling practices including how the foods you ate were prepared.

If many people have reported being ill after eating at a particular establishment or eating a particular food then a larger investigation is begun. Investigators from the state health department will often assist the local health agents. They work with the local health agents to uncover the causes of outbreaks and put in place procedures to prevent future outbreaks. The investigation of larger outbreaks may include collecting stool samples for testing from employees and ill patrons. Food samples may also be collected for analysis. 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?**

If there is suspect food left over, it should be stored in the refrigerator. It should be kept in the original container. If that is not possible, put it 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?**

For additional information on foodborne illness see the following information from the Food and Drug Administration:

- FDA's Bad Bug Book: <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/%7Emow/intro.html>
- FDA's The Unwelcome Dinner Guest: Preventing Foodborne Illness: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fdunwelc.html>
- FDA's Foodborne Illness page: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/foodborn.html>

Or visit the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's website on Foodborne Illness Information at <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/fpp/retail/Safety.htm>