

Foodborne illness is often avoidable

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Each year, Americans develop more than 50 million cases of foodborne illness. While some are caused by eating out, others originate in home

kitchens. Still more result from contact with someone already infected.

"It's one of the most common things we see," said Dr. Ross Rodgers, an emergency medicine physician at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center.

While stories of restaurant health code violations, recalled groceries, and entire cruise ships being affected make the news, foodborne illness is so common it often goes undiagnosed or is confused for a stomach bug.

Dr. Brian McAllister, a gastroenterologist at Hershey Medical Center, said clinical history can help determine the cause of symptoms such as nausea and vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain.

"It can be helpful to know about sick contacts, food and travel history," he said. Whether the illness came from food or from a highly contagious [stomach bug](#) such as the norovirus, recommendations and treatment are often the same. Rodgers said that because [foodborne illnesses](#) are highly contagious, being in close quarters with an infected person can also cause the illness to spread.

"Most cases are self-limited and will resolve over the course of days," McAllister said. He advises patients to stay well-hydrated and rest their bowels by adhering to a bland, low-fat diet for a few days. If the symptoms come alongside fevers, bloody or inflammatory diarrhea, severe pain, or signs of dehydration such as dizziness, increased heart rate, muscle ache or fatigue, it's time to seek medical attention.

Rodgers said children and those who have chronic illnesses or suppressed immune systems should head to the doctor sooner. "The body is amazing how it can fight off these illnesses, but the threshold for seeking medical care depends on the individual," he said.

Although it can be difficult to avoid ever getting a foodborne [illness](#), both doctors agree there are some things you can do to minimize your risk.

The first is proper sanitation when handling food.

"If all of us washed our hands and were careful with food, it would greatly reduce the number of infections we see," Rodgers said.

When cooking, don't use leftover marinade on cooked foods or use utensils that touched uncooked food to serve prepared items.

Rodgers recommends use of a meat thermometer to ensure that the meat is cooked to a temperature that would rid it of any viruses or bacteria.

Most people know to be careful with raw meat, seafood, poultry and eggs, but Rodgers said the same types of viruses and bacteria can be present on produce and other types of food, so he recommends washing produce and leafy greens.

Picnics and cookouts tend to be times when people leave food out longer because they are socializing and doing activities besides eating. During the summer months especially, it's crucial to keep food refrigerated and not let it sit out for more than two hours. When temperatures pass the 90-degree mark, the time food can stay out decreases to just an hour.

And as for sizing up the cleanliness of a restaurant when eating out, Rodgers recommends going with your gut feeling. "If the place seems clean and tidy, they probably follow good practices with their [food](#). If it looks a bit shady, I would move to another place," he said.

If in doubt, look up the government health inspection for the place. "Americans eat out all the time and overall, we do very well," Rodgers

said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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