



Don't Blame The Cook: Food Intolerance, Allergies And Other Reasons For A Sleepless Night

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The next time you feel bad after a meal, don't jump to conclusions and blame the cook right away.

Food can become contaminated at any point during production and distribution, and foodborne illnesses can be caused by improper preparation or mishandling at home or in food service establishments. However, a significant percentage of problems aren't the result of contamination or mishandling, but stem from food intolerances, allergies and other causes.

In other words, remember what you learned in statistics class: correlation doesn't imply causation. Just because you're sick all night doesn't mean your dinner is the offender, or at least, not in the way that you're assuming.



High-Risk Foods and the Pathogens that Love Them

Certain foods are considered high-risk for foodborne illnesses — poultry, eggs, leafy greens and vegetables, raw milk, cheese, seafood and fresh meats — and are nothing to dismiss.

Salmonella, found in poultry and raw eggs, results in the most hospitalizations. Listeria, typically found in fresh meats and other ready-to-eat foods, raw fruits and vegetables, and soft cheeses made with unpasteurized milk, is a leading cause of death from foodborne illnesses.

Other common pathogens that can cause foodborne illnesses are Campylobacter, Staphylococcus aureus (staph) and norovirus, which is the leading cause of foodborne illness in the United States, according to the CDC.

However, Your Last Meal May Not be the Culprit

Most of us have claimed food poisoning at some point. We went out to eat, and a short time later we felt sick to our stomachs. The symptoms for most pathogens are similar:

nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain/cramps, diarrhea and fever. After a day or two, we felt better and vowed never to eat at that restaurant again.

But was that self-diagnosis accurate? We look at common patterns and tend to conclude causation. We assume that the meal we ate just prior to onset of our symptoms was the culprit. However, that's often an inaccurate conclusion, since the symptoms of most foodborne illnesses take longer to develop than the trip home from the restaurant.

Most people infected with salmonella begin showing symptoms 12-to-72 hours after infection. Norovirus symptoms develop 12-to-48 hours after being exposed. Campylobacter symptoms take two-to-five days to start. One exception among the common pathogens for foodborne illnesses is staph. Staphylococcal toxins are fast-acting, with symptoms usually developing within 30 minutes to six hours.

In similar fashion, if your symptoms clear up fast, food also may not be the cause of your illness. Most foodborne illnesses aren't over quickly, but last two to seven days. The greatest threat is dehydration, especially in young children, older adults and people with other illnesses.

(Let's stop right here and make one thing clear: If you do become sick after eating and are worried about your symptoms, contact your doctor. I'm not a medical professional, and nothing I say here is meant to offer advice or substitute for necessary medical care.)

If It's Not Food Poisoning, Why Do I Feel So Bad?

The answer to that question may still lie on the plate, but in the form of a food intolerance. Food intolerance is difficulty digesting certain foods, resulting in an unpleasant physical reaction. The symptoms are similar to foodborne illnesses, but the onset tends to be much quicker.

Foods most commonly associated with food intolerance include dairy products, grains that contain gluten, and foods that cause intestinal gas buildup, such as beans and cabbage. And with more and more foods containing preservatives or substances to enhance taste and appearance, food additive intolerance has been a steadily growing problem over the last 30 years.

Food intolerance should not be confused with a food allergy. As many as [15 million Americans](#) have food allergies, including nearly six million children. Food allergies involve your immune system and can be life-threatening.

While food intolerance and allergies share some symptoms, food allergies may also cause rash or hives, shortness of breath and chest pains. Symptoms of food allergies usually start as soon as a few minutes after eating a food and as long as two hours after. Even small amounts of a food can trigger an allergic reaction.

Many of the common pathogens attributed to foodborne illnesses are also spread through contact with an infected person, rather than food itself. Norovirus is frequently

spread by infected food handlers touching food with bare hands prior to serving, and symptoms can be serious, particularly among the very young and very old. This pathogen is also commonly the source of “stomach bug” outbreaks in schools and daycares. Norovirus is highly contagious and spreads easily, since children may not be as diligent about handwashing as necessary, and a person can be contagious as long as two weeks after symptoms have cleared.

Food Safety Begins at Home

All that being said, preparing and cooking food safely is still key to avoiding foodborne illness. Experts recommend [four simple steps](#):

- Clean — Wash hands and food preparation surfaces frequently.
- Separate — Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs away from ready-to-eat foods during and after preparation.
- Cook — Use a food thermometer to ensure that foods are cooked to a safe internal temperature.
- Chill — Refrigerate perishable food within two hours (and one hour if the outdoor temperature is above 90°F) and thaw frozen food safely in the refrigerator, cold water, or the microwave.

You should also take precautions when dining out. Many areas require posting of health inspection scores in areas that are clearly visible to the public. That information is also available on health department websites. One popular review site is even partnering with cities and counties to provide this information to consumers. Sometimes you can spot problems simply by looking around. If tables and utensils aren't clean, and the waiter keeps sneezing, you may want to consider going somewhere else.

Remember that meat, fish, poultry and eggs should be cooked thoroughly to kill germs. If your burger looks undercooked, you should probably send it back. Leftovers also should be handled properly; remember the rule about chilling perishable food. If you're going to a movie after dinner, it might be better to pass on the to-go box this time around.