

Stomach Problems

Was it something I ate?

Have you experienced the sudden onset of stomach problems such as vomiting and/or diarrhea? You may have connected your illness with the last meal you ate, or the last restaurant meal you ate, and thought you had food poisoning. However, not all cases of vomiting and diarrhea are the result of something you ate.

Food poisoning, also called foodborne illness, is caused by eating food contaminated with disease causing germs or poisons. Signs of illness vary from mild to severe and typically include nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Foodborne illness can happen wherever food is prepared or handled not only in restaurants. You may even become ill from food prepared in your own home or in the home of family and friends.



After eating contaminated food there is usually a delay before the signs of illness start. Illness for the most common foodborne disease causing germs do not appear for up to 12 hours after eating contaminated food and can appear up to 1 week later. Other germs can take weeks to months to cause illness. This means that the last meal eaten before illness begins is often not the source of the illness.

While people may associate vomiting and diarrhea with eating contaminated food, illness may be caused by germs that are spread in ways other than food. Some examples of where this may happen are after handling animals such as pets, touching contaminated objects and surfaces or after contact with someone who is ill with vomiting and diarrhea. In these cases the germs are not transmitted through food.

“Norovirus” is a common example of a germ that is easily spread through food, by an infected person or by touching contaminated surfaces. The main signs of illness are the sudden onset of nausea, cramps, chills, fever and vomiting and/or diarrhea. Illness usually starts 12 to 48 hours after infection with the germ and generally last between 24 to 72 hours.

In some cases vomiting and/or diarrhea is not caused by germs. Vomiting and diarrhea may be caused by a variety of medical conditions, for example Crohn’s Disease, some medicines such as antibiotics, and many other possible causes. Stress and anxiety may also cause diarrhea.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your symptoms see your doctor. This is particularly important for young children, the elderly or immunocompromised individuals.

For other food related information visit the Fraser Health website at: www.fraserhealth.ca/foodsafety