



# Frequently asked questions about Campylobacter

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency  
Division of Environmental Health

## What is campylobacter?

Campylobacter is an infectious disease caused by bacteria. Most people who become ill with campylobacter get diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain, and fever within two to five days after exposure. The diarrhea may be bloody and can be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. The illness normally lasts one week. Some infected persons do not have any symptoms. In **rare instances**, the infection can be life threatening.

## How common is Campylobacter?

*Campylobacter* is one of the most common causes of diarrheal illness in the United States. Many cases go undiagnosed or unreported, and campylobacter is estimated to affect over 2.4 million persons every year. Campylobacter occurs much more frequently in the summer months than in the winter. The bacteria affect infants and young adults more frequently than persons in other age groups and affects males more frequently than females.

## How is the infection diagnosed?

Many different kinds of infections can cause diarrhea and bloody diarrhea. *Campylobacter* infection is diagnosed through a culture of a stool specimen.

## How can campylobacter be treated?

Almost all persons infected with *Campylobacter* recover without any specific treatment. Patients should drink extra fluids as long as the diarrhea lasts. In more severe cases, antibiotics can be used, and can shorten the duration of symptoms if given early in the illness. Your doctor should decide whether antibiotics are necessary.

## Are there long-term consequences?

Most people who get campylobacter recover completely within two to five days, although sometimes recovery can take up to 10 days. Rarely, *Campylobacter* infection results in long-term consequences such as arthritis or in rare cases, develop a disease called Guillain-Barré syndrome

## How do people get infected with this germ?

Campylobacter usually occurs in single cases, but it can also occur in outbreaks, when a number of people become ill at one time. Most cases of campylobacter happen due to eating raw or undercooked poultry or from cross-contamination of other foods by these items. Infants may get the infection by contact with poultry packages in shopping carts. Outbreaks of *Campylobacter* are usually associated with unpasteurized milk or contaminated water. One way to become infected is to cut poultry meat on a cutting board, and then use the unwashed cutting board or utensil to prepare vegetables or other raw or lightly cooked foods. The *Campylobacter* organisms from the raw meat can thus spread to the other foods.

Occasionally, campylobacter is spread by direct contact between humans and the feces of infected animals.

### **How does food or water get contaminated with Campylobacter?**

Many chicken flocks are infected with *Campylobacter* but show no signs of illness. *Campylobacter* can be easily spread from bird to bird through a common water source or through contact with infected feces. When an infected bird is slaughtered, *Campylobacter* organisms can be transferred from the intestines to the meat. In 2005, *Campylobacter* was present on 47% of raw chicken breasts tested. *Campylobacter* is also present in the giblets, especially the liver.

### **What can be done to prevent Campylobacter infection?**

Some simple food handling practices can help prevent *Campylobacter* infections.

- Cook all poultry products thoroughly. Make sure that the meat is cooked throughout (no longer pink) and any juices run clear. All poultry should be cooked to reach a minimum internal temperature of 165 °F.
- If you are served undercooked poultry in a restaurant, send it back for further cooking.
- Wash hands with soap before preparing food
- Wash hands with soap after handling raw foods of animal origin and before touching anything else.
- Prevent cross-contamination in the kitchen by using separate cutting boards for foods of animal origin and other foods and by carefully cleaning all cutting boards, countertops, and utensils with soap and hot water after preparing raw food of animal origin.
- Avoid consuming unpasteurized milk and untreated surface water.
- Make sure that persons with diarrhea, especially children, wash their hands carefully and frequently with soap to reduce the risk of spreading the infection.
- Wash hands with soap after contact with animal feces.

### **What are public health agencies doing to prevent or control campylobacter?**

To learn more about how *Campylobacter* causes disease and is spread, CDC began a national surveillance program in 1982. A more detailed active surveillance sentinel system, FoodNet ([www.cdc.gov/foodnet](http://www.cdc.gov/foodnet)), was instituted in five sites in 1996 and subsequently expanded to ten sites. FoodNet monitors the incidence and trends of human *Campylobacter* infection over time and conducts studies to identify risk factors for infection. The U.S. Department of Agriculture conducts research on how to prevent the infection in chickens.

**To learn more about campylobacter and other diseases and health issues, visit our website at:**

[www.bhsj.org](http://www.bhsj.org)

**Or call your local Health Department office at:**

**Coldwater**  
279-9561 x 106

**Hillsdale**  
437-7395 x 111

**St. Joseph County**  
269-273-2161 x233