

STAPHYLOCOCCAL

FOOD INTOXICATION

FACTSHEET

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and
Investigation
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580
Washington, D.C. 20002
(202) 442-9371 * Fax (202) 442-8060

What is staphylococcal food intoxication?

Staphylococcal food intoxication (not an infection) is caused by several enterotoxins of *Staphylococcus aureus*; staphylococci multiply in food and produce the toxins. Diagnosis of the illness is easier when a group of cases is seen with acute, predominantly upper gastrointestinal symptoms and the short interval between eating a common food item and the onset of symptoms.

Who gets staphylococcal food intoxication?

Any person can get this intoxication, which is widespread and relatively frequent. About 25% of U.S. population is carriers of *Staphylococcus aureus*.

How does staphylococcal food intoxication occur?

The *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria may be of human origin and can be found on the skin and in the nose and throat of most people. Individuals with colds and sinus infections may be carriers. Infected wounds, pimples, boils and acne are other sources. Staphylococcus is also widespread in untreated water, raw milk and sewage. Ingestion of a food product containing staphylococcal enterotoxin is the most common route of transmission. Foods involved are particularly those that come in contact with food handlers' hands, either without subsequent cooking or with inadequate heating or refrigeration, such as pastries, custards, salad dressings, sandwiches, sliced meat and meat products, inadequately cured ham and salami, and in inadequately processed cheese. When these foods remain at room temperature for several hours before being eaten, toxin-producing staphylococci multiply and produce the toxin.

What are the symptoms of staphylococcal food intoxication?

The intoxication usually comes with an abrupt and violent onset of vomiting, nausea, cramps, and exhaustion, often accompanied by diarrhea and

low-grade fever, and sometimes, low blood pressure. Symptoms occur between 1 to 8 hours after ingestion of enterotoxin, but usually between 2 to 4 hours.

How is staphylococcal food intoxication treated?

Rehydration is recommended to replace fluids. Hospitalization may be required for severe cases.

What can be done to prevent staphylococcal food intoxication?

- Reduce food-handling time (initial preparation to consumption) to an absolute minimum, with no more than 4 hours at ambient temperature.
- Keep hot foods hot ($\geq 140^{\circ}\text{F}$)
- Keep cold foods cold ($\leq 40^{\circ}\text{F}$)
- Drink only pasteurized milk, juice or cider.
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly, especially those that will not be cooked.
- Drink municipal water that has been treated with chlorine or other effective disinfectants.
- Make sure that persons with diarrhea, especially children, wash their hands properly with soap after using the toilet.
- Wash hands thoroughly after changing soiled diapers.
- Avoid swallowing lake or pool water while swimming. Anyone with a diarrheal illness should avoid swimming in public pools or lakes, sharing baths with others, and preparing food for others.

Want more information?

Information about Staphylococcal Food Intoxication and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842.

