

# **CAMPYLOBACTER FACT SHEET**

## **What is Campylobacter?**

Campylobacter bacteria are the commonest cause of reported food poisoning in Britain.

## **What are the symptoms?**

The usual symptoms are stomach cramps, profuse diarrhoea, and sometimes vomiting and fever. Although the illness is very unpleasant, patients usually recover without treatment in a few days. Antibiotic treatment is available for unusually severe cases.

## **What is the incubation period?**

After the bacteria have been swallowed they multiply in the gut and symptoms usually develop after about 3 to 5 days (can be between 1 and 10 days).

## **How will I know if I have the infection?**

If you are ill with diarrhoea, you should visit your doctor who will arrange a stool specimen from you. The precise diagnosis is made by growing and identifying the bacteria in the laboratory.

## **How long should I stay off work?**

If you are working with food or with the young, elderly or those in poor health, you must tell your employer about your illness. You should not return to work until your stools are back to normal and you have been symptom free for 24 hours. Children should not attend playgroups, childminders nursery or primary school until they have been symptom free for 24 hours.

## **Where does Campylobacter come from?**

Campylobacter can be found in the intestinal tracts of wild birds and various other animals including pets. Any raw meat, especially offal, may be contaminated with Campylobacter. Poultry, especially chickens, may carry large numbers of these bacteria without showing any sign of illness. Campylobacter can be found in a large proportion of raw chickens sold in shops and supermarkets.

## **How can Campylobacter be prevented?**

Only a small number of Campylobacter need to be swallowed to produce illness. A few transferred, say from uncooked chicken to a piece of bread, can cause infection. Infection can be prevented by:

### **Not eating contaminated food -**

- Food does not look, taste or smell any different if it is contaminated with Campylobacter. Raw meat should be handled as though harmful bacteria are present. Raw poultry and other types of meat should be kept separate from ready-to-eat food. Utensils and surfaces that have come into contact with raw meat should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitised after use. Hands should be washed thoroughly after touching raw meat.
- Cooking destroys the bacteria. All meat should be adequately cooked right through to the middle. This would also reduce the risk of salmonella infection
- **Not drinking untreated water** - lakes, rivers, streams etc can become contaminated with Campylobacter from wild and domestic animals. All water for human consumption must be properly treated. You should try not to swallow water when taking part in water activities.
- **Not drinking untreated milk** - Milk easily becomes contaminated from animals carrying Campylobacter. It is advisable therefore to drink only treated milk (e.g. pasteurised).
- **Avoiding direct contact with infected animals** - such as puppies with diarrhoea.
- **Not having indirect contact with infected animals** - such as visiting farms or drinking milk from bird pecked bottles. Wash hands thoroughly after activities such as visiting farms, working in the garden or handling animals, especially before eating or drinking.

Although the faeces of people suffering from the disease are infective, person to person spread is not common.

**For further information please contact London Borough of Merton, Environmental Health & Trading Standards, Civic Centre, London Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5DX. Telephone No: 020 8545 3024.**