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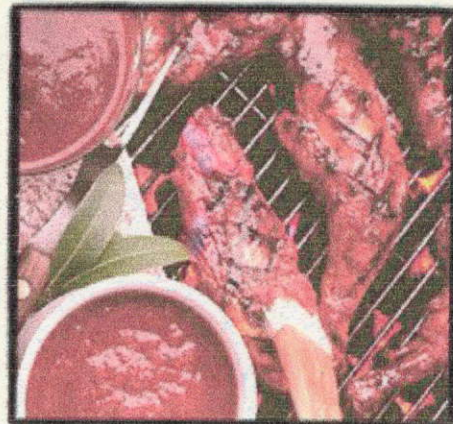
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Is It Food Poisoning — Or Are You Just Sick?

By Margie Patlak

On the drive home from the big picnic, you start to feel queasy. Too much sun, you think. But by nightfall queasiness has turned to nausea and then into a night of vomiting. Next day you're exhausted and achy and not straying too many steps from the bathroom.



Then the worry sets in: Is this just a nasty bout of stomach flu — or have you unwittingly joined a food-poisoning outbreak? Should you ride it out as you normally would any stomach bug — or call a doctor to be checked out? The last thing you want to do is get dressed and go out, but with all the dire reports of deadly food poisoning cases, are you putting yourself at risk by staying home?

The answer depends largely on who's sick and how sick.

Stomach flu and food poisoning do have many similarities and sometimes similar causes. They're both inflammations of the lining of the stomach and intestines.

Usually the stomach flu is caused by viruses passed along directly by another person. Outbreaks occur among children in day care and then their parents, for instance. Stomach flu generally lasts a day or two.

Food poisoning, in contrast, is usually caused by bacteria that have been able to multiply in food or drink, get into your stomach and produce poisons that make you sick.

There may be no need to visit your doctor. Your body usually quickly resolves most episodes of food poisoning without the aid of any treatments — vomiting and diarrhea get rid of most of the offending substance and your immune system takes care of the rest. By the time the stool culture comes back verifying whether you've had food poisoning, you're already feeling fine and back at work.

Bear in mind that, even if you do go to the doctor, you can't always expect your doctor to "cure" you. Some types of food poisoning are caused by viruses for which there are no effective drug treatments, and antibiotics often can't eradicate the body of some of the bacterial causes of food poisoning, including *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, and *E. coli*. But a course of antibiotics can shorten the duration of illness from some food borne-infections — such as those caused by *Cyclospora* or *Campylobacter* — or prevent damage to a fetus.

"For the vast majority of Americans with a touch of food poisoning, all you need to do is try to get some fluids and rest and you should recover," says gastroenterologist Peter McNally of Eisenhower Army Medical Center in Augusta, Ga.


But in some cases it's a good idea to call a doctor's office and discuss whether you ought to go in. Whether the doctor decides to treat you depends on how severe and persistent your symptoms are, and whether you have other medical conditions that would boost your risk of having a more serious form of food poisoning.

Call if you have a medical condition, such as AIDS, diabetes or cancer, that hampers your immune defenses.

Also, the elderly, pregnant women and small children can suffer serious consequences from food poisoning. Most deaths from food poisoning in this country occur in infants or the elderly, and some types of food poisoning can damage a fetus. So any repeated episodes of vomiting or diarrhea in these individuals should trigger a phone call to the doctor, if not an actual visit.

It's also a good idea to check with your doctor if the

symptoms go beyond ordinary vomiting and diarrhea. Call in cases of:

- **Blood in your vomit or diarrhea.** Such blood is not bright red, but rather the color of coffee grounds. This symptom can occur in food poisoning caused by such bacteria as Shigella, Campylobacter, Salmonella, or certain strains of E. coli. The actual culprit is pinpointed by culturing a stool sample. (Blood in the stool or vomit also can be a sign of ulcers or tumors, which likewise require immediate medical attention.)
- **Dehydration.** The main hazard to be on guard for in the case of both stomach flu and food poisoning is dehydration, especially in children, because repeated episodes of vomiting and diarrhea can quickly bring their bodies' fluids to dangerously low levels. Telltale signs of dehydration are crying without tears, a dry tongue or mouth, no pooling of saliva under the tongue, sunken eyes, no sweat under the armpits during a fever, dizziness and lightheadedness or decreased urination. To counter dehydration, your doctor may prescribe antidiarrheal medications or drugs that prevent vomiting. It may also be necessary to pay a short visit to the hospital to receive fluids intravenously.
- **Other possibly serious signs.** Suggestions that something may require medical advice or treatment include severe abdominal pain or pain emanating from one section of the stomach, a fever greater than 101.5 degrees F, uncontrollable vomiting, dizziness, confusion, and vomiting or diarrhea that shows no signs of abating after a day or two.
- **In the end, it's your decision** whether to seek assistance or not. As family physician Sloan Karver of Allegheny University in Philadelphia notes, "You need to use your good judgment and go with how you're feeling. If you are feeling really horrible, you don't have to hold off seeing a doctor." 

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