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What to do if you get food poisoning



Seek medical assistance if you have persistent abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea or high fever.

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Q *How do I know if I have food poisoning? Can I self-medicate or should I consult a doctor?*

A Food poisoning occurs when you eat something that contains harmful bacteria or toxins. Symptoms include vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and/or fever.

The symptoms are similar to those of viral gastroenteritis (stomach flu), which is caused by viruses transmitted through direct or indirect contact with an infected person.

If multiple people fall ill simultaneously after eating food from a common source, food poisoning is the likely case.

When to consult a doctor

Young children, the elderly and those with chronic illnesses (such as diabetes, kidney and heart disease) are more vulnerable and should be assessed by a doctor early.

If you have persistent vomiting, seek medical assistance. In such cases, adequate oral rehydration is not possible, so you may be given medication via injection or intravenous drip.

Severe diarrhoea can also result in dehydration if you do not drink enough fluids.

Signs of dehydration include a dry tongue, sunken eyes, con-

centrated urine (dark yellow), decreased urination, giddiness or near fainting episodes, and marked lethargy.

If you have high fever, diarrhoea or abdominal pain that does not improve after a few days, get a doctor to assess if antibiotics or referral to a hospital is required.

When in doubt, it is safer to consult a doctor.

Stay hydrated

Self-medicating may be appropriate if symptoms are mild and improve with medication.

If you feel nauseous or have mild vomiting but can still retain fluids orally, drink small amounts at frequent intervals, for example, half-a-cup every 15 to 30 minutes.

Try not to drink only water as it does not provide any electrolytes or calories.

You can alternate plain water with fluids such as barley water, rice water, diluted juice, clear soup, diluted milk (for babies and young children) or oral rehydration solutions.

If you have diabetes, monitor your blood sugar level a few times a day and consider omitting a dose of medication if you have poor appetite and your sugar level is not high.

Those with kidney or heart disease, and who are on a strict

fluid-restricted diet, should consult a doctor as close monitoring is needed and home management may not be feasible.

Dietary advice

During the acute phase of illness, a bland diet is recommended and can be introduced slowly if you have not vomited after a few hours of oral rehydration.

Suitable foods include:

- bread or toast,
- biscuit,
- porridge,
- steamed fish or chicken,
- soup, or
- mashed potato.

If you can keep your food down, gradually return to a normal diet over 12 to 24 hours.

Watch what you eat

To reduce the risk of food poisoning, try to eat from reputable food establishments as much as possible.

If you suspect you have food poisoning, consider alerting the National Environment Agency, so its officers can investigate.

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