What is Campylobacter?

Campylobacter are bacteria that can infect the bowel. It is one of the commonest causes of infectious diarrhoea in the UK. Most cases occur as single infections, not as part of large outbreaks.

The disease tends to be more common in May to July and late in the autumn.

What are the symptoms?

The time between swallowing the bacteria and symptoms starting (the incubation time) is between 2 and 5 days but can be as long as 11 days.

Symptoms include:

- Diarrhoea - sometimes with blood
- Abdominal/stomach cramps
- Fever
- Nausea and/or vomiting

Symptoms usually settle within 7 days but a very small number of infected people may have complications e.g. a type of arthritis may occur in response to the infection. Not everyone who is infected with Campylobacter will have symptoms.

How does it spread?

- Eating raw or undercooked meat (especially poultry e.g. chicken) contaminated with the bacteria
- Drinking
  - unpasteurised (raw) milk
  - milk from bottles where the top has been pecked by birds
  - untreated water contaminated with the bacteria
- Not washing your hands thoroughly after touching infected animals both farm and domestic, especially young animals under 6 months of age
- Campylobacter can be found on many uncooked meats and kitchen equipment used to prepare raw meat or poultry e.g. knives and chopping boards
- The risk of the infected person passing the infection on to others is fairly low. However the infection can be spread within families, playgroups etc where there is a breakdown in hygiene practices
- An infected person may contaminate food if they do not wash their hands properly before preparing, cooking or serving food

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What precautions should I take?

1. Thorough handwashing, taking care to clean the fingertips and between the fingers. Wash hands:

   after and before
   • handling animals • cooking
   • changing nappies • handling raw meat
   • visiting the toilet • feeding young or elderly people
   • handling raw meat • eating

2. Make sure all foodstuffs that are from animal sources, especially poultry, are thoroughly cooked.

3. Do not use the same chopping board or kitchen surface or knife for raw meat and then for other foodstuffs without first washing it thoroughly to prevent the spread of infection.

4. Do not drink unpasteurised (raw) milk or milk from bottles where the tops have been pecked by birds.

5. Remember cooked meat should be stored at the top of the fridge and uncooked meat at the bottom.

6. Thoroughly wash all salad vegetables and fruit before consumption.

Will I need treatment?

Generally people with Campylobacter do not require treatment other than making sure that they drink enough fluid to prevent dehydration. Sometimes a GP may decide to prescribe an antibiotic. If prescribed it is important that you complete the course as instructed on the bottle or packet.

As always it is important that anyone with a diarrhoeal illness does not return to work, school or nursery etc until they have been completely free of all symptoms for 48 hours. Food businesses may have their own guidelines that exclude individuals for longer.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding Campylobacter, contact your GP or Health Visitor. Alternatively you can contact the Health Protection Team on 01224 558520.

If you need this or any other NHS Grampian publication in an alternative format (large print, audiotape etc) or in another language please contact Health Protection Team on 01224 558520.