



Foodborne Illness Outbreaks

Berrien County Health Department has always taken food-related illnesses and restaurant facility complaints very seriously. When a food illness is called into the Berrien County Health Department, it is sometimes because the caller suspects that something eaten at a restaurant or food service establishment made them and/or others sick. Though it is not always the case that a food service establishment caused the illness(es), the Berrien County Health Department first asks the caller what they ate in the two weeks before their symptoms started. It is important that callers try their best to remember what they ate and where it was purchased or obtained. In an investigation of food or water-related illnesses, details are necessary.

The Berrien County Health Department uses an interview form to best record what the caller says. Callers might be asked their:

1. Name
2. Age
3. Contact information
4. Details about the illness, including medical attention sought, medications prescribed or taken, symptoms, onset and when symptoms ended

Any other questions the Berrien County Health Department feels might help in the investigation

After speaking with a caller, we only share the information between specific departments, each with a different expertise.

Public Health Nurses: Public health nurses are responsible for

many of the daily clinical duties of the health department and are also key players when a complaint is brought to our attention. A public health nurse is the person that will ask a caller a series of standardized questions in order to get background information about the illness. They enter this information into a database for other members of the Health Department to see.

Epidemiologist: An epidemiologist is someone who helps monitor the number of illness cases and uses statistics to identify abnormal situations. The Berrien County Health Department has one epidemiologist who looks at the database of foodborne illnesses and complaints regularly or is notified of unusual events.

If a caller mentions symptoms that fit specific categories or if many people call the Health Department who are not related but have similar complaints, then a foodborne illness might be called an "outbreak". An outbreak is a technical term used by health departments. It does not indicate that an illness is extremely dangerous or that the number of people sick is necessarily very high. In the event of a possible outbreak, the epidemiologist might call a meeting, called a "Surveillance Meeting" with public health nurses, members of the Health



Department's administration, and members of the Environmental Health division.

Environmental Health Officers: Environmental health workers specialize in food and water safety. They do restaurant inspections regularly and usually conduct a special inspection if a food or water-related illness complaint or a facility complaint is reported. They share this information at the Surveillance Meeting.

Sometimes the special inspection reveals a correctable problem that has led to illness. Sometimes however, it is necessary to contact hospitals or other health officials to see if the problem is shared by people outside of Berrien County. Knowing about more cases makes possible causes more evident.

Whether the exact cause of the illness(es) is found or not, the Berrien County Health Department does all it can to prevent more people from getting sick. Recommendations are sometimes given to restaurants and facilities. Physicians and other health care providers are sometimes told of the incident(s). Lastly, forms are sent to colleagues at the Michigan Department of Community Health and/or the Michigan Department of Agriculture.

The public health nurses, the epidemiologist, the environmental health officers..... the work of the Health Department is built on collaboration. Please join us.

Special thanks to Brandis Belt for her help with this article!

The Berrien County Health Department has five locations to serve you:

Benton Harbor		Niles		Three Oaks
769 Pipestone	M-139 Office	School Based	1205 N. Front St.	21 N. Elm
P.O. Box 706	2106 S. M-139	870 Colfax Ave	684-2800	756-2008
926-7121	927-5623	925-4500		

Or visit us on the web at www.berriencohlthdept.org

Berrien County Health

Department:
Preventing Disease,
Prolonging Life and
Protecting the
Health of the
Community.



Bats, Bugs, and Bacteria

In July, the Health Department will focus on Bats, Bugs, and Bacteria (and some other things we will all encounter being outdoors in this hot summer month). Foodborne Illness Outbreaks, 4th of July Safety, Rabies, Lyme Disease, and Youth Fair will be highlighted this month. For questions about any of these topics, please call the health department at **926-7121**.

Can I help report outbreaks?

You can help us in our efforts. When calling about a facility or food complaint, please cooperate with those asking you for information. If you have a suspicion that a certain item made you sick, hold on to that item in a refrigerator. It is possible for us to take samples of it for analysis.

The Berrien County Health Department never uses information gained for an outbreak investigation for anything other than the investigation itself.



For more information, call the health department at

926-7121

This page is sponsored by the Berrien County Health Department

