

# Foodborne Illness



It is not always the case that a food service establishment caused the illness, so Health Department employees will ask callers questions to get more information. Callers might be asked:

- Name and Age
- Contact information
- Details about the illness, including medical attention sought, medications prescribed or taken, symptoms, onset and when symptoms ended

- Food history for the last 3 days and up to 2 weeks before the illness began
- Any other questions that might help the investigation.

Investigating and responding to foodborne illness is an important function of the health department, and many different areas are involved. Some include:

**Public Health Nurses:** A public health nurse will ask a caller a series of questions 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 helps monitor the number of illness cases and uses statistics to identify abnormal situations. This person looks at the database of

foodborne illnesses and complaints regularly and is notified of unusual events.

**Environmental Health Workers:** 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. 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 Health Department does all it can to prevent more people from getting sick. Recommendations are sometimes given to res-



taurants and facilities. Physicians and other health care providers are sometimes told of the incident. Lastly, forms are sent to colleagues at the Michigan Department of Community Health and/or the Michigan Department of Agriculture.

The work of the Health Department is built on collaboration, including Public Health Nurses, Epidemiologist, Environmental Health Workers, and the community. 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 (269) 926-7121 or visit us online at [www.bchdmi.org](http://www.bchdmi.org).

Foodborne illness results from eating food contaminated with bacteria (or their toxins) or other pathogens such as parasites or viruses. Illnesses range from upset stomach to more serious symptoms. Although most foodborne infections are undiagnosed and unreported, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that every year about 76 million people in the United States become ill from pathogens in food. Of these, about 5,000 die.

Harmful bacteria are the most common causes of foodborne illnesses. Some bacteria may be present on foods when you purchase them. Foods that can be contaminated include raw meat and poultry, seafood, eggs, and produce such as lettuce, tomatoes, sprouts, and melons. Contamination may also occur during food preparation in a restaurant or at home.

Health Department sanitarians inspect all restaurants in Berrien County to keep their food and facilities safe for the public. In 2009, the health department completed 1,288 restaurant inspections and issued 313 temporary food licensees. Even with the thorough inspections, sometimes people can get sick from contaminated food at restaurants, which people report to the health department for investigation.

## Health Department Response

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.



## Outbreaks

If a caller mentions symptoms that fit specific categories or if many people call 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.