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Food Poisoning vs. Stomach Virus

by Summer Stanley

We've all had the symptoms – stabbing pains in the abdomen, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, maybe even a fever. Often our first thought is, "Oh no. Food poisoning!" But is it?

The same symptoms can also indicate a stomach virus (often mistakenly called "stomach flu"). While many strains of stomach virus exist, the most common in the United States is norovirus.

According to FoodSafety.gov, there are about 48 million cases of food poisoning annually. In comparison, there are 19 million to 21 million cases of norovirus in the U.S. per year, the CDC says. Both illnesses lead to hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations annually.

The main difference between the two illnesses is the means of transmission. A stomach virus is usually spread by eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with the virus; and/or having direct or indirect mouth contact with an infected person or surface with the virus on it. In contrast, food poisoning is usually caused by cross-contamination, during which bacteria and other harmful organisms are transferred from one surface to another.

Symptoms of food poisoning can start within hours of eating and tend to last from a few hours to several days. Stomach virus symptoms often last 3-4 days but can last as long as 2 weeks. Diagnosing either illness is difficult and is usually based on the symptoms alone.



Many simple precautions can prevent a variety of stomach illnesses:



- Wash your hands with soap and water before eating or preparing food.



- Avoid eating raw meat, raw eggs, or sauces made with raw eggs.



- Rinse fruits and vegetables and cook all food thoroughly.

- Clean and disinfect potentially contaminated surfaces.

- Wash contaminated laundry thoroughly in hot water.

- Use separate personal items from a person suspected to have a stomach virus.

The foods most likely to cause food poisoning if stored, prepared, or cooked improperly are:

1. Poultry
2. Vegetables and leafy greens
3. Fish and shellfish
4. Rice
5. Deli meats
6. Unpasteurized dairy
7. Eggs
8. Fruit
9. Raw sprouts





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(cont.)

Mayo Clinic recommends seeking medical attention if you experience these symptoms:



- Frequent episodes of vomiting and inability to keep liquids down
- Bloody vomit or stools



- Diarrhea for more than three days
- Extreme pain or severe abdominal cramping



- An oral temperature higher than 100.4°F
- Signs or symptoms of dehydration like excessive thirst, dry mouth, little or no urination, severe weakness, dizziness, or lightheadedness



- Neurological symptoms such as blurry vision, muscle weakness, and tingling in the arms



Resources:

- "Food Poisoning," accessed Feb. 3, 2020, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/food-poisoning/symptoms-causes/syc-20356230>
- "Top 9 Foods Most Likely to Cause Food Poisoning," accessed Feb. 3, 2020, from <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/foods-that-cause-food-poisoning>
- "Food Poisoning," accessed Feb. 3, 2020, from <https://www.foodsafety.gov/food-poisoning>
- "Do I Have a Stomach Virus or Food Poisoning?" accessed Feb. 3, 2020, from <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/311508.php>
- "How Common are Noroviruses?" accessed Feb. 3, 2020, from <https://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/food-poisoning/qa/how-common-are-noroviruses>

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