

Yersiniosis

Public health information sheet

Yersiniosis (or yersinia) is a type of bowel infection that occurs when you swallow the yersinia bacteria. People usually become infected from eating unsafe (contaminated) or poorly handled food, often pork.

The illness mostly causes gastroenteritis symptoms (diarrhoea and vomiting) but some people have more severe and ongoing symptoms, such as joint pain.

How it spreads

Yersinia is caused by swallowing the yersinia bacteria. This can happen:

- when handling food, especially undercooked pork or other meats and small goods
- when drinking unpasteurised (raw) milk
- when drinking from an untreated water supply, such as roof, tank or bore water
- from contact with domestic or farm animals, especially pigs.

People and animals who have yersinia pass the bacteria out of their body in their poo (faeces). If you then eat food, drink water or touch things contaminated with this bacteria you can become infected too.

Symptoms

People can become unwell from one to 11 days after being infected. The illness usually starts with flu-like symptoms, such as headache and fever.

This is then followed by:

- diarrhoea (runny poo)
- severe stomach pain
- feeling and being sick
- fever

Symptoms usually last two to three days, but can occur for as long as three weeks.

Some people develop joint pains which can last for several months. These can be severe and disabling.

People who are immunocompromised can also develop sepsis (blood poisoning).

If you have symptoms

While most people can recover from yersinia at home, you should get health advice if symptoms are severe or ongoing, or if you are immunocompromised. You can contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116. You may be asked to provide a sample of your poo for testing, to check if you have the illness.

Treatment

If you have yersinia it's recommended you drink lots of fluids and get plenty of rest.

Seek advice from a doctor if your symptoms are severe, or if your child has diarrhoea and is vomiting or refusing extra drinks.

If symptoms are severe you may be prescribed antibiotics to help clear the infection from your body. Most people though can get rid of the bacteria from their body naturally over time without antibiotic treatment.

Restrictions

If you have yersiniosis you are at risk of passing on the infection to others.

You should stay home from work, school or day care until you have been free of diarrhoea symptoms for at least 48 hours (2 days).

You should also avoid close contact with infants, the elderly or people with serious health conditions until you have been symptom free for 48 hours.

You cannot give blood for three months after you have had yersinia. This is because it can also be passed on to others through blood transfusions.

If you also get a blood stream infection (blood poisoning, sepsis or septicaemia) you should not donate blood for six months.

To prevent others being infected you should wash hands with soapy water for 20 seconds, then dry well with a clean cloth or paper towel every time:

- after going to the toilet

- before preparing food, eating or drinking
- after changing babies nappies.

Prevention

In addition to practicing good hand hygiene, you should:

Food safety

- thaw frozen meat completely
- cook meat thoroughly
- keep raw meat separate from other foods in the refrigerator
- store raw foods underneath cooked foods to prevent cross contamination
- thoroughly clean knives, cutting boards and other surfaces after contact with raw meats.

Safe drinking water

- avoid drinking water that has not been treated – including water from lakes, rivers or streams, or from an area where you don't know the quality of source water.
- if you have to drink untreated water that is taken from a roof, river or lake (eg, in a rural area), it should be boiled for at least 1 minute or treated.

Swimming

- avoid swimming in a pool if you have diarrhoea. You need to wait at least two weeks after the symptoms have gone.

Bathing and washing

- avoid sharing bathwater, as this can easily spread the infection.

For more information

For more information visit:

➤ www.arphs.nz/yersiniosis

If you are concerned about yersinia call
Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or
contact your doctor or practice nurse.