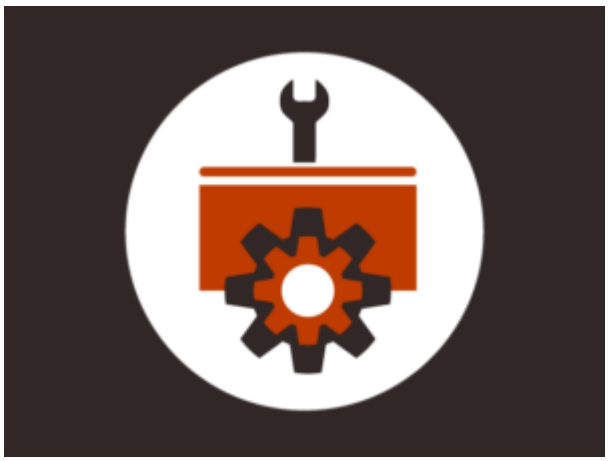
CDC Foodborne Illness FAQ



The most frequently asked questions on foodborne illness and foodborne disease.

What is foodborne disease?

Foodborne disease is caused by consuming contaminated foods or beverages. Many different diseasecausing microbes, or pathogens, can contaminate foods, so there are many different foodborne infections. In addition, poisonous chemicals, or other harmful substances can cause foodborne diseases if they are present in food.

More than 250 different foodborne diseases have been described. Most of these diseases are infections, caused by a variety of bacteria, viruses, and parasites that can be foodborne. Other diseases are poisonings, caused by harmful toxins or chemicals that have contaminated the food, for example, poisonous mushrooms. These different diseases have many different symptoms, so there is no one “syndrome” that is foodborne illness. However, the microbe or toxin enters the body through the gastrointestinal tract, and often causes the first symptoms there, so nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and diarrhea are common symptoms in many foodborne diseases.

Many microbes can spread in more than one way, so we cannot always know that a disease is foodborne. The distinction matters, because public health authorities need to know how…