



Campylobacter – New Bug on the Block

Ask most people to name an organism that causes food poisoning and they will probably say “Salmonella”. If you mention Campylobacter they will probably say “never heard of it!” yet Campylobacter is the most common cause of bacterial food poisoning in this country. So why have so few people heard of it? This article aims to explain why and to show you what you can do to minimise the risk of being made ill by this nasty bug.

Although it has been known for many years that Campylobacter is a cause of diarrhoea in cattle it is only in the last ten years or so that it has come to be recognised as a major cause of human illness. It is quite difficult to grow in the laboratory and therefore not as easy to study as most other bacteria, and its growth characteristics are much different to those of Salmonella. Whereas Salmonella grows rapidly in food and therefore often leads to big outbreaks of food poisoning which can be easily identified and studied, Campylobacter does not usually grow in food. Its best growing temperature is 42°C and it is incapable of growing below 30°C. Anyone with any food hygiene training will realise that food must be kept below both these temperatures in order to prevent the growth of Salmonella and other food poisoning organisms. So if Campylobacter does not grow in food what is the problem?

Well the problem is that, unlike Salmonella, you only need a few individual organisms to make you ill -10-50 bacteria should be enough. If they have got onto the food, and have not been killed by cooking, they will give you food poisoning – abdominal pain and diarrhoea and sometimes fever. And there are lots of places the bacteria can come from and lots of different routes they can get onto or into your food.

Where is it found – How is it spread?

Campylobacter has been found in rivers, estuaries and coastal waters and in cattle, sheep, pigs and (especially) in birds. It is believed that birds are the best host because of their higher body temperature than other animals.



So, as far as food is concerned, the “danger food” to watch out for is chicken (or turkey). A recent survey carried out by the Food Standards Agency showed that 76.1% of whole chickens at the point of retail were contaminated with Campylobacter.

This need not be a problem if the chicken is thoroughly cooked as Campylobacter is easily killed by heat. In fact, chicken itself is rarely the final cause of food poisoning from this bug. What is a much greater risk is the contamination of ready to eat foods. A recent study in Ireland showed that 13.2% of the outside surfaces of chicken wrapping were contaminated with Campylobacter due to blood leakage through the packaging. So if you put your newly purchased chicken in your trolley or shopping bag in contact with, say, a lettuce, the lettuce can easily become contaminated and will not be cooked later to rectify the problem. Healthy eating has just become unhealthy eating!

Campylobacter can also be transmitted directly by live animals. Flies can carry the organism and leave it behind after they have walked on your food. Or they may leave it on your worktop which you then place your food onto. If birds peck at your milk on the doorstep they may transmit the organism straight into the bottle. And if you handle animals, whether pets or farm animals, and then put your fingers to your mouth or pick up a sandwich, you are asking for trouble.

A serious problem

The problem is getting worse. Cases of illness from Campylobacter in the UK increased from about 25,000 cases a year in 1986 to around 50,000 cases a year by 2000. Levels then remained fairly steady for a few years until, in the first half of 2009, they shot up again, increasing by 17% over the first half of 2008. And, for some unexplained reason, the Colchester and Tendring areas seem to have a higher incidence than most other areas of the country.



What can I do to stop my family becoming ill?

- Keep raw meat, especially poultry, well away from ready to eat foods during shopping, transport, storage and preparation.
- Cook all meats, especially poultry, thoroughly. Use a probe thermometer to ensure the centre temperature has reached at least 75 °C. [Special care is needed with barbeques].
- Keep flies (and other animals) out of food preparation areas.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after handling raw meat or poultry and after touching any animal. You will also need to wash your hands scrupulously before handling food if you have been ill yourself, in order not to infect the rest of the family.
- If you suffer from “bird pecking” on the doorstep, provide small plastic beakers and persuade your milkman to use them to protect the bottle tops.
- Do not drink raw milk.
- If you are ill and suspect Campylobacter, see your G.P. - but remember that this organism has a long incubation period of several days, so don't blame the last thing you had to eat.

To watch a short video clip showing how easily Campylobacter spreads go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdTFPwuV7Xc>

For further advice on Campylobacter, or any other type of food poisoning, contact Colchester Borough Council's Food and Safety Team on 01206 282582.