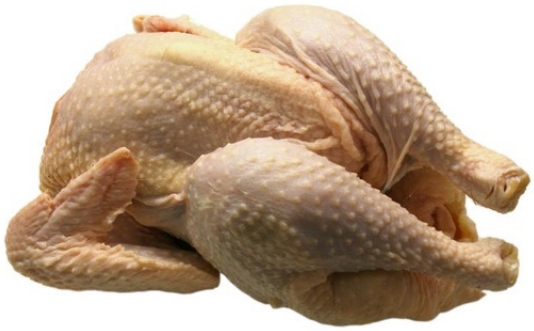
Colchester Food Safety Newsletter

Issue 16 – Summer 2015

Campylobacter – the fight goes on

Campylobacter is the bacterium that causes the highest number of food poisoning cases in the UK (more than the number caused by Salmonella, E.coli and Listeria put together). If you get it, you'll certainly know about it with 2 – 5 days of severe stomach pain and diarrhoea. In some cases it can be fatal. It is estimated that 280,000 people a year become ill from Campylobacter.



The main source of Campylobacter is raw chicken and the Food Standards Agency has been working hard at all levels of the food chain over the past few years to reduce levels of Campylobacter in raw chicken at the point of sale. The original target set was to reduce the percentage of chickens with more than 1000 Campylobacter per gram at the end of the slaughter process (defined as "high level contamination") from 27% in 2008 to 19% by 2013 and to 10% by 2015.

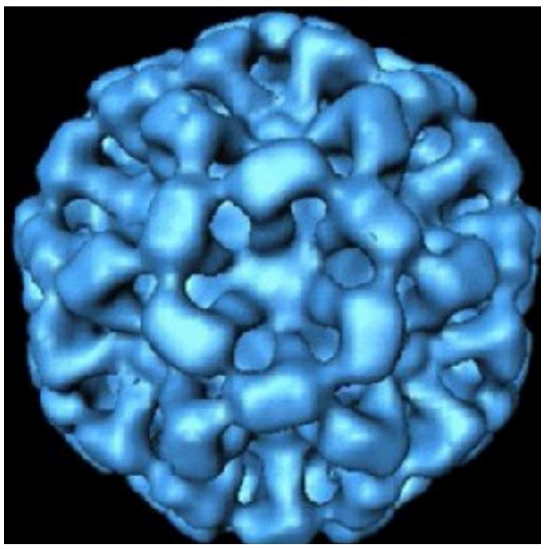
As well as working with poultry producers and slaughterhouses to achieve this, the Food Standards Agency has also been working with the major supermarket chains to encourage them to take measures to reduce even further the likelihood of any remaining contamination causing food poisoning. You may have noticed, for example, that some supermarkets are now selling whole chickens in sealed bags which are designed to go straight into the oven and thus avoid the risk of contaminating other foods or work-surfaces.

So we are now at 2015. Have the targets been reached? Unfortunately not. The FSA has just concluded a year of sampling chicken from both the larger and smaller retailers. Those larger retailers that have implemented a Campylobacter reduction strategy have seen a fall in levels of contamination but none of them has so far reached the 10% target. Four of the major supermarket chains have passed the 2013 target of less than 19% but the overall average across all retailers is still 19.4% of chicken contaminated at the highest level. 72.8% of chickens showed some contamination with Campylobacter. A new sampling programme will start shortly to keep track of progress.

So What Can I Do ?

- Ensure all chicken is cooked thoroughly. Heat easily destroys Campylobacter.
- Cover raw chicken and store it well away from other foods at the bottom of the fridge.
- DO NOT wash chicken before cooking it. This goes against the grain with many people but it is not necessary and is one of the main ways Campylobacter is spread around the kitchen.
- Wash all utensils and contact surfaces thoroughly as soon as possible.
- Have a look at the "Chicken Challenge" website at www.food.gov.uk/news-updates/campaigns/chicken-challenge

What is Norovirus?



Norovirus is the most common cause of epidemic acute gastroenteritis. The main symptom is violent vomiting but nausea, abdominal cramp and diarrhoea also frequently occur. It is also sometimes known as “stomach flu” or “winter vomiting bug”.

The incubation period is usually 24 – 72 hours and it usually lasts 12 – 72 hours.

The bad news is that this is one of the most infectious organisms known (one scientist has described it as “the most infectious agent ever described”) and it rapidly spreads, particularly where there are lots of people in a restricted area such as a hospital, care home or cruise liner.

Some of the reasons it is so infectious include:

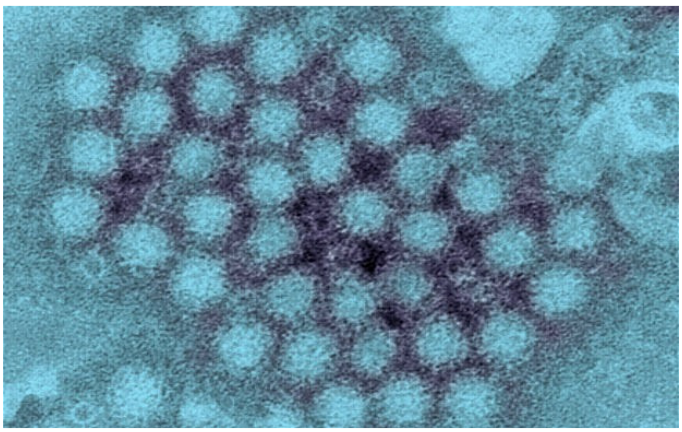
- There is no protective immunity
- It survives a long time in the environment (up to two months)
- It is stable on human hands for over two hours
- It is resistant to disinfection
- People who are infected excrete large amounts of virus and for quite a long time (up to 35 days)
- 20 – 30% of infected cases show no symptoms so they will pass it on to others without being aware they have it.

The peak Norovirus season usually runs from Christmas through January and February but in early December 2012 the Health Protection Agency were reporting that the season had started early with already over half a million people infected and infection levels 64% higher than the same period the previous year.

The symptoms of Norovirus are identical to food poisoning but Norovirus can be caught in a number of ways – through food, from the environment or person-to-person.

Some foods (particularly raw shellfish such as oysters) may contain Norovirus due to contamination from sewage during growth or harvesting, but in theory any food could be contaminated by an infected food handler.

It is essential, therefore, that any food handler showing symptoms should not be working anywhere in the food environment.



Vomit

However good the hand-washing regime is, Norovirus can easily be picked up by inhaling airborne droplets from vomit. Any vomit must be cleared up immediately and the whole area disinfected.

For further guidance on this see “What to do when somebody vomits” at
www.colchester.gov.uk/article/13281/Food-and-Safety-Publications

Hand Washing

Bearing in mind the facts listed above, you will see that exclusion of food handlers while they are ill is only going to go part of the way to preventing spread of the virus. As many infected people show no symptoms, and excretion of the virus can continue for up to 35 days, thorough handwashing is essential at all times.

Many food handlers think they are being extra hygienic by using alcohol-based hand gel but experiments have shown that alcohol-based sanitisers are less effective at removing Norovirus from hands than ordinary soap and water. If alcohol-based sanitisers are used they should never replace normal handwashing but be used as an extra precaution after thorough handwashing with soap and water.

Campylobacter-free Chicken Liver Paté

A number of outbreaks of food poisoning due to Campylobacter have been caused by the undercooking of chicken liver pate. If chicken livers are over-cooked they can become unappetising and grey with undesirable changes in texture. Caterers have, therefore, tended to under-cook them in order to retain their customer appeal. The livers can become infected internally so washing the surface of the livers before preparation does not remove the problem. Between 80 – 90% are infected.
The Food Standards Agency commissioned research to identify a safe method of production of chicken liver pate which would still retain the qualities demanded by the consumer. The researchers discovered 40 different recipes in use for the production of chicken liver pate and carefully analysed these. They also carried out these recipes with testing to establish the temperatures reached in practice and the level of destruction of Campylobacter.

In agreement with previous researchers, they found that pan-frying of chicken livers resulted in an uneven heat application with the centre of the liver commonly being significantly cooler than the surface. A much better temperature distribution is achieved if the livers are oven cooked in a Bain Marie after they have been blended with the other ingredients. Before blending the livers should be soaked in milk for at least an hour to remove the blood (which causes bitter tastes), then rinsed under running tap-water before soaking in vinegar for two minutes to remove the surface contamination.

The full recipe and method can be found as Appendix 2 to the report which can be found at

www.food.gov.uk/science/research/foodborneillness/b14programme/b14projlist/fs101062

Use of this validated protocol should ensure that your chicken liver pate will be free from Campylobacter.

Disinfection

However good your procedures and technique may be, disinfection will only be as good as the chemicals you use. The Food Standards Agency has advised that adequate chemical disinfection can only be achieved if the chemical you use has been certified to either BS EN 1276 or BS EN 13697. It must also be used at the right dilution and given the correct contact time before rinsing off.

Unfortunately, many manufacturers do not put this information on the bottle. A website has now been produced which lists the main products that have been tested to these standards, together with their dilution rates and contact times. In some cases, links are also provided to the manufacturer's website for further information.

If you have not already verified that you are using certified disinfection products in the right way, please check the website now and, if you can't find the product you use, consider changing to a product that is on the list.

http://www.disinfectant-info.co.uk/

Safer Food Better Business

Hard copies of the Safer Food Better Business pack are now only available to new businesses. If you are an existing business and need a new pack or a diary refill, please go to http://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/caterers/sfbb/ where these can be downloaded.

If you do not want to print them out, they can be downloaded to your computer and completed online, provided they are always kept available for inspection. Alternatively, if you need a diary refill and have not got a computer, a large page-a-day diary is just as good, provided you sign each day to confirm that your standard "safe methods" have been used and record anything that happens during the day that is not part of your established daily routine.

If you have a Safer Food Better Business pack but are not really sure what to do with it, a series of short video guides can be found on the internet at www.sfbbtraining.co.uk You are recommended to watch these because if you have not completed the pack properly, or are not using it properly, you are not complying with the law.

The Pitfalls of Dishonesty

On Christmas Day 2012 a meal was served at the Railway Hotel, Hornchurch, Essex, which resulted in 33 people becoming ill and one person dying from Clostridium perfringens. The pub was part of the Mitchells and Butlers chain – the largest operator of restaurants, pubs and bars in the U.K. They had a detailed written procedure for the preparation of the Christmas meal which should have ensured that the meal was safe – and, indeed it was safe in all their other outlets. But something had gone seriously wrong at the Railway Hotel.

The turkey was cooked the day before and something must have gone wrong with the cooling or the subsequent re-heating processes. Exactly what will probably never be known because the General Manager and the Kitchen Manager both tried to cover up the incident by making false witness statements and falsifying the records.

After a trial lasting nearly 7 weeks, Mitchells and Butlers were found guilty of serving unsafe food and both the General Manager and the Kitchen Manager were found guilty of "conduct tending to pervert the course of justice". Sentencing was deferred until 23rd January 2015.

Mitchells and Butlers received a record fine of £1.5 million for this offence. The greatest shock, however, was the immediate 18-month and 12-month prison sentences received by the General Manager and Kitchen Manager respectively.

Lessons to be learnt:

- Detailed written procedures are no good unless they are followed to the letter.
- Records must be completed accurately and as soon as possible. If something has gone wrong, say what it is and what you did to put it right.
- Never falsify records.
- Never lie to an EHO, on a witness statement, or in court

Next Level 2 Food Hygiene Courses

Rowan House, Sheepen Road, Colchester
14 July 2015
2 September 2015
7 October 2015

9.30 – 5.00
Contact 01206 282581 for further details or to make a booking.

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