

[Home](#) [About CDC](#) [Press Room](#) [A-Z Index](#) [Contact Us](#)
[CDC en Español](#)Search: 

Division of Foodborne, Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases (DFBMD)

[Home](#) > [Disease Listing](#) > Salmonellosis General Information

Salmonellosis

[Email this page](#)[Printer-friendly version](#)
[General Information](#) | [Technical Information](#) | [Additional Information](#)

Program Contents

[Home](#)[About DFBMD](#)[Programs](#)[Offices](#)[Disease Listing](#)

More information about Salmonellosis and related outbreaks may be found on the [Salmonella Topic Page](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

- [What is salmonellosis?](#)
- [What sort of germ is Salmonella?](#)
- [How can Salmonella infections be diagnosed?](#)
- [How can Salmonella infections be treated?](#)
- [Are there long-term consequences to a Salmonella infection?](#)
- [How do people catch Salmonella?](#)
- [What can a person do to prevent this illness?](#)
- [How common is salmonellosis?](#)
- [What else can be done to prevent salmonellosis?](#)
- [What is the government doing about salmonellosis?](#)
- [How can I learn more about this and other public health problems?](#)
- [What can I do to prevent salmonellosis?](#)

Contact Information



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What is salmonellosis?

[In English/en Español-24/7](#)

Salmonellosis is an infection with bacteria called *Salmonella*. Most persons infected with *Salmonella* develop diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps 12 to 72 hours after infection. The illness usually lasts 4 to 7 days, and most persons recover without treatment. However, in some persons, the diarrhea may be so severe that the patient needs to be hospitalized. In these patients, the *Salmonella* infection may spread from the intestines to the blood stream, and then to other body sites and can cause death unless the person is treated promptly with antibiotics. The elderly, infants, and those with impaired immune systems are more likely to have a severe illness.

[Back to Top](#)

What sort of germ is Salmonella?

Salmonella is actually a group of bacteria that can cause diarrheal illness in humans. They are microscopic living creatures that pass from the feces of people or animals to other people or other animals. There are many different kinds of *Salmonella* bacteria. *Salmonella* serotype Typhimurium and [Salmonella serotype Enteritidis](#) are the most common in the United States. *Salmonella* germs have been known to cause illness for over 100 years. They were discovered by an American scientist named Salmon, for whom they are named.

[Back to Top](#)

How can *Salmonella* infections be diagnosed?

Many different kinds of illnesses can cause diarrhea, fever, or abdominal cramps. Determining that *Salmonella* is the cause of the illness depends on laboratory tests that identify *Salmonella* in the stool of an infected person. Once *Salmonella* has been identified, further testing can determine its specific type.

[Back to Top](#)

How can *Salmonella* infections be treated?

Salmonella infections usually resolve in 5-7 days and often do not require treatment other than oral fluids. Persons with severe diarrhea may require rehydration with intravenous fluids. Antibiotics, such as ampicillin, trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole, or ciprofloxacin, are not usually necessary unless the infection spreads from the intestines. Some *Salmonella* bacteria have become resistant to antibiotics, largely as a result of the use of antibiotics to promote the growth of food animals.

[Back to Top](#)

Are there long term consequences to a *Salmonella* infection?

Persons with diarrhea usually recover completely, although it may be several months before their bowel habits are entirely normal. A small number of persons with *Salmonella* develop pain in their joints, irritation of the eyes, and painful urination. This is called Reiter's syndrome. It can last for months or years, and can lead to chronic arthritis which is difficult to treat. Antibiotic treatment does not make a difference in whether or not the person develops arthritis.

[Back to Top](#)

How do people catch *Salmonella*?

Salmonella live in the intestinal tracts of humans and other animals, including birds. *Salmonella* are usually transmitted to humans by eating foods contaminated with animal feces. Contaminated foods usually look and smell normal. Contaminated foods are often of animal origin, such as beef, poultry, milk, or eggs, but any food, including vegetables, may become contaminated. Thorough cooking kills *Salmonella*. Food may also become contaminated by the hands of an infected food handler who did not wash hands with soap after using the bathroom.

Salmonella may also be found in the feces of some pets, especially those with diarrhea, and people can become infected if they do not wash their hands after contact with pets or pet feces. Reptiles, such as turtles, lizards, and snakes, are particularly likely to harbor *Salmonella*. Many chicks and young birds carry *Salmonella* in their feces. People should always wash their hands immediately after handling a reptile or bird, even if the animal is healthy. Adults should also assure that children wash their hands after handling a reptile or bird, or after touching its environment.

[Back to Top](#)

What can a person do to prevent this illness?

There is no vaccine to prevent salmonellosis. Because foods of animal origin may be contaminated with *Salmonella*, people should not eat raw or undercooked eggs, poultry,

or meat. Raw eggs may be unrecognized in some foods, such as homemade Hollandaise sauce, Caesar and other homemade salad dressings, tiramisu, homemade ice cream, homemade mayonnaise, cookie dough, and frostings. Poultry and meat, including hamburgers, should be well-cooked, not pink in the middle. Persons also should not consume raw or under-pasteurized milk. Eggs and dairy products should be thoroughly washed. [Department of Health and Human Services](#)

Cross-contamination of foods should be avoided. Uncooked meats should be kept separate from produce, cooked foods, and ready-to-eat foods. Hands, cutting boards, counters, knives, and other utensils should be washed thoroughly after touching uncooked foods. Hand should be washed before handling food, and between handling different food items.

People who have salmonellosis should not prepare food or pour water for others until their diarrhea has resolved. Many health departments require that restaurant workers with *Salmonella* infection have a stool test showing that they are no longer carrying the *Salmonella* bacterium before they return to work.

People should wash their hands after contact with animal feces. Because reptiles are particularly likely to have *Salmonella*, and it can contaminate their skin, everyone should immediately wash their hands after handling reptiles. Reptiles (including turtles) are not appropriate pets for small children and should not be in the same house as an infant. *Salmonella* carried in the intestines of chicks and ducklings contaminates their environment and the entire surface of the animal. Children can be exposed to the bacteria by simply holding, cuddling, or kissing the birds. Children should not handle baby chicks or other young birds. Everyone should immediately wash their hands after touching birds, including baby chicks and ducklings, or their environment.

[Back to Top](#)

How common is salmonellosis?

Every year, approximately 40,000 cases of salmonellosis are reported in the United States. Because many milder cases are not diagnosed or reported, the actual number of infections may be thirty or more times greater. Salmonellosis is more common in the summer than winter.

Children are the most likely to get salmonellosis. The rate of diagnosed infections in children less than five years old is about five times higher than the rate in all other persons. Young children, the elderly, and the immunocompromised are the most likely to have severe infections. It is estimated that approximately 400 persons die each year with acute salmonellosis.

[Back to Top](#)

What else can be done to prevent salmonellosis?

It is important for the public health department to know about cases of salmonellosis. It is important for clinical laboratories to send isolates of *Salmonella* to the City, County, or State Public Health Laboratories so the specific type can be determined and compared with other *Salmonella* in the community. If many cases occur at the same time, it may mean that a restaurant, food or water supply has a problem that needs correction by the public health department.

Some prevention steps occur everyday without you thinking about it. Pasteurization of milk and treatment of municipal water supplies are highly effective prevention measures that have been in place for decades. In the 1970s, small pet turtles were a common source of salmonellosis in the United States, so in 1975, the sale of small turtles was banned in this country. However, in 2008, they were still being sold, and cases of *Salmonella* associated with pet turtles have been reported. Improvements in farm animal

hygiene, in slaughter plant practices, and in vegetable and fruit harvesting and packing operations may help prevent salmonellosis caused by contaminated foods. Better education of food industry workers in basic food safety and restaurant inspection procedures may prevent cross-contamination and other food handling errors that can lead to outbreaks. Wider use of pasteurized egg in restaurants, hospitals, and nursing homes is an important prevention measure. In the future, irradiation or other treatments may greatly reduce contamination of raw meat.

[Back to Top](#)

What is the government doing about salmonellosis?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) monitors the frequency of *Salmonella* infections in the country and assists the local and state health departments in investigating outbreaks and devising control measures. CDC also monitors the different types of *Salmonella* that are reported annually by public health laboratories of state and local health departments. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspects imported foods, oversees inspection of milk pasteurization plants, promotes better food preparation techniques in restaurants and food processing plants, and regulates the sale of turtles. The FDA also regulates the use of specific antibiotics as growth promotants in food animals. The US Department of Agriculture monitors the health of food animals, inspects egg pasteurization plants, and is responsible for the quality of slaughtered and processed meat. The US Environmental Protection Agency regulates and monitors the safety of drinking water supplies.

[Back to Top](#)

How can I learn more about this and other public health problems?

You can discuss any medical concerns you may have with your doctor or other health care provider. Your local City or County Health Department can provide more information about this and other public health problems that are occurring in your area. General information about the public health of the nation is published every week in the "Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)", by the CDC in Atlanta, GA. Every spring, the MMWR publishes a report of the incidence of *Salmonella* and other infections during the previous year in FoodNet sentinel surveillance sites. Epidemiologists in your local and state health departments are tracking many important public health problems, investigating special problems that arise, and helping to prevent them from occurring in the first place, and from spreading, when they occur.

[Back to Top](#)

What can I do to prevent salmonellosis?

- Cook poultry, ground beef, and eggs thoroughly. Do not eat or drink foods containing raw eggs, or raw (unpasteurized) milk.
- If you are served undercooked meat, poultry or eggs in a restaurant, don't hesitate to send it back to the kitchen for further cooking.
- Wash hands, kitchen work surfaces, and utensils with soap and water immediately after they have been in contact with raw meat or poultry.
- Be particularly careful with foods prepared for infants, the elderly, and the immunocompromised.
- Wash hands with soap after handling reptiles, birds, or baby chicks, and after contact with pet feces.
- Avoid direct or even indirect contact between reptiles (turtles, iguanas, other lizards, snakes) and infants or immunocompromised persons.
- Don't work with raw poultry or meat, and an infant (e.g., feed, change diaper) at the same time.
- Mother's milk is the safest food for young infants. Breastfeeding prevents salmonellosis and many other health problems.

[Back to Top](#)

Page last modified: May 21, 2008

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