



PUBLIC HEALTH NOTES

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Diagnosing Food Poisoning in Patients Exhibiting Symptoms of Gastroenteritis

The Healthy Environments Section of the Renfrew County and District Health Unit (RCDHU) is reminding health care providers (HCPs) that, with the coming Christmas holiday season, there may be an influx of patients presenting with gastroenteritis.

According to the Ministry of Health, approximately 100,000 cases of foodborne illness occur in Ontario each year from reportable enteric pathogens such as *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, *Listeria*, and *Yersinia*; commonly transmitted through food.

Children, seniors, and pregnant women are especially vulnerable to foodborne illness (FBI). Other risk factors for foodborne illnesses include:

- Eating hazardous or risky foods (i.e. raw and undercooked meats, unpasteurized milk)
- Contact with animals
- Contact with sick friends or family
- Travelling abroad
- Exposure to contaminated drinking water
- Eating at restaurants or events with large groups of people.

When a patient presents with typical gastrointestinal symptoms (i.e. nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhea):

1. Conduct a thorough history and physical exam. Obtaining a detailed history and identifying underlying medical conditions are important to determine appropriate course of treatment.
2. Order appropriate laboratory tests (stool bacterial culture and sensitivity, bacterial serology, stoolparasites identification).
3. Report suspect and laboratory confirmed cases of FBI to RCDHU. A Public Health Inspector will be assigned to investigate.

FBIs are more likely to occur when hazardous foods are involved in the preparation of holiday meals. This, combined with a lack of food safety knowledge, can increase the likelihood of an FBI and subsequently the likelihood of an increase in patient visits. RCDHU encourages HCPs to conduct a thorough patient history and submit laboratory specimens for diagnostic purposes to enhance provincial surveillance data and improve patient outcomes.