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How it affects you and
what you can do to
prevent it...



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This leaflet is to tell you about Clostridium perfringens infection. Although this illness usually doesn't cause any long term problems, it is an unpleasant condition while it lasts. Now read on....

What is Clostridium perfringens food poisoning and how common is it?

Clostridium perfringens food poisoning is a short diarrhoeal illness resulting from undercooking of meats, particularly large joints.

Because Clostridium perfringens is a germ that is widespread in animals and the environment, meat may be contaminated with its heat-resistant spores. If the meat is inadequately cooked, the spores survive and then grow and multiply as the meat cools.

When the germ is eaten, it finds the gut a less favourable environment than the meat and turns into a spore again. As it does so, it releases a toxin (poison) that causes diarrhoea.

It takes a lot of toxin to cause diarrhoea so only eating large numbers of Clostridium perfringens can cause it.

How is Clostridium perfringens caught?

Clostridium perfringens is caught from eating meat in which the germs have survived cooking.

Typically, large joints of meat, or preparations of meat such as stews, are the foods involved as their centres often do not reach a sufficient temperature to kill Clostridium perfringens.

What are the symptoms of Clostridium perfringens food-poisoning?

This is a short term illness, generally lasting under 24 hours. The symptoms are diarrhoea and abdominal pain. Fever and vomiting are unusual.

Because the illness is caused by a toxin (poison) made by Clostridium perfringens, illness comes on within a short time of eating the contaminated food - usually 12 to 24 hours.

Are there any longer term complications of Clostridium perfringens food poisoning?

No. As with any diarrhoeal illness, dehydration can result but generally the period of illness is so short that people previously in good health weather it without problems.

How do I know if I have Clostridium perfringens infection?

Diagnosis is best done by finding the toxin in the faeces but this is very difficult to do unless a specimen is provided very quickly during or after the illness. By the time any tests are able to be done, the toxin is likely to have gone. Instead, the diagnosis is usually reached by finding unusually large numbers of Clostridium perfringens germs, instead of the toxin, in the faeces and, ideally, in any contaminated food.

How is Clostridium perfringens food poisoning treated?

There is no treatment available or required for this illness.

What can be done to prevent Clostridium perfringens infection?

There are two main principal measures:

- Cook your food thoroughly. For big joints, it is best to rely upon an oven thermometer, which only costs a few pounds. Although Clostridium perfringens food poisoning is not a particularly serious condition, there are a number of other, more serious conditions linked to undercooking of food. A thermometer will help prevent these as well.
- After cooking, if food is not to be eaten straight away, cool it rapidly. The aim is to get the temperature of the hot cooked food down as soon as possible to a level where the germs don't grow.
- Do not be tempted to put freshly-cooked foods straight into the refrigerator - this will just overload the refrigerator's cooling system. Instead, put the food (covered) in a cool place for no longer than 1 1/2 hours before storing it in a refrigerator.