ALPINE SHIRE

Environmental Health – Food poisoning

Food poisoning and complaint investigation

Many people have experienced food poisoning or know someone who has. The symptoms of food poisoning can differ greatly between individuals and while some individuals may experience mild effects, other incidents of food poisoning can be fatal, particularly in children, and those who are very ill.

Why does food poisoning occur?

There are many factors that can render food or drinks unsuitable for human consumption. Most food poisoning occurs due to microbiological contamination, however physical contamination (ie a piece of glass in cake), and chemical contamination can also have adverse effects.

Microbiological contamination will only occur if potentially hazardous microbes have a suitable environment in which to survive. The following list includes practices that are likely to provide microbes with a suitable environment to live:

- Foods that have been prepared in advance and are not stored correctly ie. kept at room temperature instead of under refrigeration;
- Hot food is cooled too slowly prior to refrigeration;
- Food is reheated at a low temperature ie. food is not heated to an adequate temperature quick enough to kill the food poisoning bacteria;
- Food is not cooked for long enough;
- Frozen poultry is not defrosted correctly;
- Raw and cooked foods are mixed causing cross-contamination;
- Hot foods are stored below 60O C;
- Cold foods are stored above 5O C;
- Food handlers are unwell whilst preparing food (e.g. have a gastrointestinal illness);

How to prevent food poisoning at home:

Many people believe that they are only at risk from food poisoning when they eat out. However, most food poisoning occurs in the home and can be attributed to '24 hr bugs'. Council's Environmental Health Officers can help protect you from food poisoning whilst eating out, but it is up to you to protect yourself whilst at home or when handling food for community groups. For further information on the prevention of food poisoning in the home, visit www.health.vic.gov.au

How to prepare safe food at home:

- Practice safe food handling and storage;
- Ensure you practice good personal hygiene ie. wash your hands before handling food;
- Keep foods either above 60 deg C or below 5 deg C and not between these temperatures for more than 2 hours;
- Cook food correctly and thoroughly; and
- Make sure food is served as soon as possible after preparation
- Use clean utensils and cutting boards
- Clean all utensils and cutting boards after use on raw food
- Keep raw food separate from cooked or ready to eat foods so as to prevent cross contamination.

For further information contact Council's Environmental Health Unit on 03 5755 0555 for a full range of brochures about safe food handling. For further information on safe food preparation visit www.health.vic.gov.au

Food safety complaints:
Council's Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) are responsible for investigating food related complaints. Unsafe or unsuitable food is food that has one or more of the following traits:

- Would be likely to cause physical harm to a person;
- Is damaged, deteriorated or perished;
- Contains any damaged, deteriorated or perished substance;
- Containing a biological or chemical agent, or other matter or substance, that is foreign to the nature of the food (eg mould, cleaning chemicals or a piece of glass).

I think I have food poisoning:
If you have eaten food from a food premises within the Alpine Shire and believe you have or have had food poisoning, you should contact Council's Environmental Health Unit as soon as possible on 03 5755 0555.

Many people have suffered food poisoning or know someone who has. Food does not need to be spoiled, it can look, smell and taste fine but can still cause food poisoning. An individual can experience one or more of the following symptoms in varying degrees of severity.

Possible symptoms of food poisoning:

- vomiting
- fever and chills
- diarrhoea
- nausea
- abdominal pain
- bloody stools
- headache
- lethargy
- loss of appetite

The symptoms experienced depend on the individual's immunity, the cause of poisoning (type of bacteria, or chemical), and the quantity of infected food that was consumed.

Food poisoning investigations can be difficult to conduct. In many cases the food poisoning has been reported too late and the suspect food has been completely consumed or discarded. However, it is still important to report your illness so that an investigation can be conducted.

Food poisoning occurs when food is consumed that has not been prepared, stored, displayed or transported safely. The time between eating the food and the appearance of the first symptoms can range from 1 hour to as long as a week or more. This means that the last meal you ate may not necessarily be responsible.

Complaint investigation
If you have a food complaint there are several things that you can do to help the Environmental Health Officer conduct their investigation:

- Place any contaminated/left over food in the freezer until the EHO comes to collect it.
- Keep any packaging and proof of purchase to help identify what the product is and where it was purchased.
- If possible, do not remove the foreign object from the food, or try to clean it
- Write down the details of where you purchased the product and the time, how you transported the product, where you stored it and when you noticed the foreign object.

If you suspect food poisoning, try and remember what you had eaten and drank the 7 days before you became ill and write this down. This will help the EHO investigate the possible sources of your illness.

If you think you are suffering from food poisoning, please consult your doctor and contact Council's Environmental Health Unit as soon as possible.

To lodge a food complaint contact Council's Environmental Health Unit on 03 575 0555. For further information on the bacteria that causes food poisoning, and ways to prevent it, please visit the links below:

Department of Human Service – Public Health www.health.vic.gov.au/phtopics or Food Safety Victoria - www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety