

Public health works to prevent foodborne illness year-round

By Clark Snyder

As the Yellowstone County public health authority, RiverStone Health investigates reports of foodborne illness throughout the year. Last year, we received 34 complaints from people who thought they got sick from food from restaurants or other food services.

Each year 1 in 6 Americans (48 million of us) get sick with foodborne illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There are at least 40 different kinds of bacteria, viruses, parasites and molds that can occur in food. These illnesses usually arise from improper holding temperatures, inadequate cooking, contaminated equipment, food from unsafe sources, or poor personal hygiene. Costing roughly \$77.7 billion annually, foodborne illness is a major concern.

The first step in the RiverStone Health investigation is to look for other related cases. A public health nurse or sanitarian (inspector) will conduct a confidential interview with each individual to determine when, where, and how they may have been exposed to the illness. Questions will also be asked about exposure to other sources of infection such as unpasteurized or raw foods, untreated water, septic system failure, contact with wild and domestic animals and other people who are sick. We ask about their work to identify risk of spreading illness in childcare facilities, schools or nursing homes.

The ill individuals will be advised to seek necessary medical care and submit a stool sample for analysis if they have not already done so.

We offer advice on how to keep from spreading illness to others. We emphasize frequent and thorough handwashing, especially after using the bathroom, changing diapers and before handling food.

A sanitarian visits and inspects any food service establishments that were listed as a possible source of exposure. The sanitarian asks about the health of the staff and checks food handling practices throughout the facility.

It is rare that a specific food item can be identified as the culprit. In those rare cases, that food item is removed and a sample obtained for analysis.

While people usually associate their illness with the last place they ate before becoming sick, it may not be related at all. Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever and other symptoms of food-related illness might not occur for days or weeks after contaminated food is eaten.

A team of nurses, sanitarians and epidemiologists at RiverStone Health work together to identify associations between people, places, time and other factors that may link one or more cases together. They use this information to identify the disease, the source and how it is spread. When necessary, immediate corrections at the food service are required. There may be food recalls or trace backs with industry and other regulatory agencies.

RiverStone Health thoroughly investigates every confirmed or suspected case of foodborne illness when we get complaints. However, we work every day to prevent foodborne illness. We have ongoing education for food businesses and managers on safe food practices. Food vendors want to provide their customers with safe, wholesome food. Our shared goal is to keep our food supply safe.

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