

HEALTH

## Can you be 'too clean'? Experts separate food poisoning myths from facts

BY KHOO BEE KHIM 12 DEC 2018 

Does having diarrhoea mean you have food poisoning? And does being healthy protect you from it? CNA Lifestyle speaks to the experts to find out.



(Photo: Unsplash/Igor Miske)

**F**ood poisoning is no light matter, as recent mass incidents in Singapore, the **region** and **abroad** have shown. In mild cases, you may be purging yourself at both ends, depending on the **pathogen that has infected you**. But for certain individuals, such as pregnant women, young children, the elderly and those with compromised immune systems, the repercussions can be severe.

Salmonella, which has been in the news with the **Spize food poisoning** case in Singapore, can lead to meningitis or a potentially fatal infection of the brain's membranes, noted Medical News Today.



(Photo: Pixabay/derneuemann)

*E. coli*, another main pathogen seen in food poisoning, may result in kidney failure by causing haemolytic uremic syndrome – a condition where the lining of the kidneys' tiny blood vessels are damaged, according to the Mayo Clinic.

But does a bout of diarrhoea always mean food poisoning? And can you be too clean for your own good? Here's a look.

**DOES BEING TOO CLEAN MAKE YOU PRONE TO FOOD POISONING?**



(Photo: Unsplash/Michael Jasmund)

Although the condition has the word “poison” in it, food poisoning is really an infection, said Dr Reuben Wong, a gastroenterologist at Gleneagles Hospital’s gutCARE. “Food poisoning is when a virus, bacteria or fungus causes an infection, which the immune system reacts to and needs to overcome. Most of the time, it is caused by a virus.”

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Not all microbes are bad news to your health. Some can cause disease and can even kill, but there are also beneficial ones that protect your skin, promote gut health and boost immunity. In fact, exposure to good microbes early in life can do your health plenty of good, said Professor Graham Rook, an epidemiologist at the University College London on the BBC website.

Getting these beneficial bacteria in the gut, for instance, “teaches” the immune cells not to overreact when it encounters microorganisms and lessens the chances of allergies, he said.



*(Photo: Unsplash/rawpixel)*

But how do you separate the good from the bad microbes? You don't have to because the immune system is like a farmer, said Prof Rook. The good microbes stay, while the bad ones that contain pathogens get weeded out.

This is why obsessively bleaching every surface isn't doing your immune system good. "Being used to a clean environment can result in one being less exposed to pathogens, and so one may not have the immunity to them," said Dr Wong.

That said, you should not stop observing good hygiene practices, like washing your hands before touching food. If anything, scientists consider dirty hands to be one of the most likely reasons how infections are passed.

Besides, the "immunity" you get from exposing yourself to microbes in the environment "is not a certainty, and with most organisms, one can get infected again," said Dr Wong.

**ARE YOU LESS LIKELY TO GET FOOD POISONING IF YOU'RE HEALTHY?**



(Photo: Pexels/rawpixel)

There is some truth to this, although food poisoning can also be the luck of the draw, said Carolyn Raab, a foods and nutrition specialist from Oregon State University. According to Raab, those with weak immune systems are more susceptible to food-borne illness and serious complications as a result. That includes infants, young children, older adults, people with diseases such as cancer, Aids and diabetes, as well as pregnant women and their fetuses.

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At times, it could be the medicine that you're taking. Nutritionist Monica Reinagel noted on the Quick And Dirty Tips website that acid-blocking medications could potentially make you more susceptible to food-borne bacteria because one of the functions of stomach acid is to kill offending micro-organisms before they cause problems.

Having said that, there is some limitation to what your gastric juices can do. "The acid the in the gastric juices certainly will kill most organisms," said Dr Wong. "But if the load of pathogens is too high, it can overcome this defence."

**DO YOU HAVE FOOD POISONING IF YOU HAVE DIARRHOEA?**



(Photo: Unsplash/rawpixel)

Not really. Diarrhoea can also be seen in people with morning diarrhoea, which is an urgent need to go to the bathroom first thing in the morning. The stool passed in loose and watery, noted Medical News Today.

If morning diarrhoea is a frequent occurrence, lifestyle habits such as smoking, drinking, midnight snacking, too much caffeine, and taking medicines such as antibiotics, could be to blame.

Sometimes, the urge to purge may be caused by stress, anxiety, dehydration, flu, pregnancy and, of course, food poisoning.

But if you have been running to the bathroom every morning as far back as you can remember, you may want to get yourself checked for conditions such as **irritable bowel syndrome**, **inflammatory bowel disease**, and food allergies that irritate the gut.

**DO YOU FEEL THE SYMPTOMS OF FOOD POISONING IMMEDIATELY?**



(Photo: Unsplash/Daive Ragusa)

Again, not entirely so. There is an incubation period and many organisms typically take three to five days to multiply and cause symptoms, said Dr Wong, although there are some bacteria that can produce toxins that show symptoms within hours.

Headlining microbes such as salmonella and E. coli that you have been reading about in the news aren't fast-acting. Salmonella, for instance, starts to show signs 12 to 72 hours after infection. E. coli can take one to eight days to hit.

For listeria, which is particularly fatal to unborn babies and newborns, the first signs of infection may only show 30 days or more after infection.

That means the last meal you ate may not be the cause of your food poisoning.

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