

Is it Stomach Flu or Food Poisoning?

(NAPSA)—A few hours ago you felt fine. Suddenly, you have stomach cramps, diarrhea and you've started to vomit. Was it something you ate? Or do you have a stomach flu virus? The symptoms are similar and you may never know which you truly have.

More important than identifying the ailment, however, is knowing how to treat your symptoms and when to see your doctor.

Whether it's a case of food poisoning or the stomach flu, you will probably be nauseous and you may vomit and have diarrhea. In addition, a headache and stomach cramps are also possible.

Food poisoning symptoms usually begin to appear two to 24 hours after eating, according to the College of American Pathologists, while virus symptoms show up from one to 10 days following exposure to an infected person.

"It can be difficult to tell the difference between food poisoning and the stomach flu," says Mary McHugh, MD, FCAP, a pathologist from Westerville, Ohio. "They are typically treated in similar ways, including rest, hydration and possibly medications for diarrhea and nausea."

How do you know when you should call your doctor and when you should just let your ailment run its course? Dr. McHugh, a pathologist who treats patients through laboratory medicine, recommends calling your doctor if the following things occur:

- Vomiting lasts longer than one day in an adult.
- Severe diarrhea (large, loose stools every one to two hours) lasts longer than two days in an adult.
- Signs of severe dehydration develop, including a decrease in urination, dry mouth and throat and feeling dizzy when you stand up.
- You are unable to tolerate any fluids.
- You have a high fever.



The flu or food poisoning? 
Know when to call your doctor.

- You have blood in your vomit or bloody diarrhea.
- You suspect food poisoning from a canned food or have symptoms of botulism, including blurred or double vision or difficulty swallowing or breathing.

According to the College of American Pathologists, the stomach flu is usually caused by viruses in the digestive system, which are most often spread by direct contact with an infected person or by sharing food, drink or eating utensils.

Food poisoning on the other hand is caused by a toxin produced by bacteria in food that is not handled or stored properly. You may suspect food poisoning when symptoms are shared by others who ate the same food or after eating some unrefrigerated or undercooked foods.

According to Dr. McHugh, "The good news is that while people with food poisoning or the stomach flu may feel horrible, most people are back on their feet within a day or two."

The single most helpful thing you can do to prevent the spread of stomach flu is frequent, thorough handwashing, says the College of American Pathologists. To help prevent food poisoning, use good common sense in the preparation, handling and storage of food. For more specific information on food poisoning prevention, visit www.cdc.gov.