

Of summer heat and food infections



YOUR HEALTH

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The weather is such that one is tempted by the juices, sherbets, flavoured milk, cut fruits and salads that roadside stalls often offer.

Unfortunately, bacteria and viruses also thrive in warm weather, especially in fruits and milk. Sometimes, a disease-carrying fly or two also settles temporarily on the food.

Summer is also the season for power cuts. Proper refrigeration, both at home and in shops, becomes ineffective, inefficient and unreliable. Fruits, meat, fish, milk and milk products spoil rapidly. To prevent losses and make their food more appealing, some vendors may even add harmful substances to their products.

Fruits and juices may be coloured with non-food grade dyes. Chemicals such as formaldehyde may be added to milk. Mayonnaise may be made with raw eggs that are contaminated.

Food adulteration is not new. Milk was often diluted with dirty water, sawdust was found mixed with tea, ground pepper contained dirt and chilli or masala powder was adulterated with brick dust. Sometimes, the bacteria contaminating the food may die, but before they do so, they release toxins into it.

People who eat or drink contaminated or spoiled food may not notice anything unusual in the smell or taste. A few hours or even a day or

two later, symptoms may appear. These include nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, rectal pain, frequent watery or bloody diarrhoea, fever and a feeling of weakness.

Symptomatic treatment is all that is required. Paracetamol can be used to reduce fever, antispasmodics may help with abdominal pain and antiemetics can reduce vomiting. A hot water bottle placed on the abdomen may also provide pain relief.

Antibiotics are not useful unless a bacterial infection such as salmonella or *E. coli* is suspected. Antiparasitic medications may be needed for infections caused by organisms such as giardia. Blood and stool tests can help establish the diagnosis.

Diarrhoea is the body's natural response to toxins and infectious agents in the intestines. The body is trying to "wash out" the harmful substances.

Antidiarrhoeal medicines are therefore best avoided unless prescribed.

Maintaining hydration is essential. Drink plenty of fluids. Oral rehydration solution (ORS) can be purchased and used. Lightly salted buttermilk or lemon juice with sugar and salt can also help.

Simple foods such as pressure-cooked khichdi may be eaten. Do not try to eat or drink large amounts, take small amounts every 20-30 minutes. The colour of the urine is a good indicator of hydration. It should remain light yellow.

A doctor should be consulted if the patient is under five years of age or over 65, is pregnant, is taking medications such as corticosteroids or has another serious illness. Medical attention is required if there is high fever, dehydration, blood in the stool, loss of consciousness, confusion or seizures, or if symptoms last for more than 48 hours.



The writer has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*. If you have any questions on health issues, please write to yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in