Sneaky Salmonella

By Joanne Murray

Stop. Put down that spoon full of cookie dough. Do you remember the last time you experienced diarrhea? How uncomfortable and painful it felt? If you eat that spoon full of cookie dough, there is a good chance that you might experience diarrhea all over again. Cookie dough contains raw eggs that can cause Salmonellosis, a diarrheal infection from the bacteria Salmonella, which lives in animal and human intestines and is usually passed through feces. Salmonellosis is a serious infection that can range from mild discomfort to life threatening consequences.

Salmonella infections are primarily caused by the consumption of foods contaminated with the bacteria. Animal products, such as beef, chicken or anything dairy, can be contaminated with Salmonella through improper slaughtering, handling and packaging or cross contamination in the home or food service establishment. Though fruits and vegetables do not naturally contain Salmonella, they can become infected with the bacteria through improper storage, handling or cross contamination with foods that are infected with Salmonella. Foods that are infected with the Salmonella bacteria look normal, smell normal and taste normal. The only way you will know if your foods are contaminated with Salmonella is when you end up on the toilet with an infection.

A lesser known source of salmonellosis is from contact with pet or human fecal matter. Many pets, especially ones that have diarrhea can spread the salmonella bacteria in the home. Reptiles are very likely to have salmonella bacteria on their bodies, even if they appear to be healthy (1). Also, human feces contains salmonella, so someone who did not wash his hands after using the bathroom could be a source of infection for the people in the household, particularly if that person prepared or touched food that others consumed.

Salmonella infections can take anywhere from twelve to seventy-two hours to begin to show symptoms. Most people experience abdominal cramps, diarrhea and a fever. For a mild infection, these symptoms can last about four to seven days and will generally subside without medication. A moderate to severe infection can last much longer and will likely require antibiotics and possibly hospitalization. Severe infections that do not clear up quickly have been
known to contribute to Reiter’s Syndrome, characterized by joint pain, painful urination and eye irritation, which can last from months to years, and may lead to chronic arthritis (1). Extreme cases of Salmonella can also result in death if they are left untreated. A stool sample is the most effective method for testing to see whether or not someone is infected with Salmonella bacteria.

The best way to prevent Salmonellosis is to maintain good hygiene and food safety practices. Always wash your hands for at least twenty seconds with soap and water after using the bathroom. When in a public setting, be cautious about what your hands come in contact with – someone may have touched what you’re touching now and did not wash his or her hands when they went to the bathroom. Always wash your hands before handling food. When handling food, take care to keep meats and poultry away from fruits and vegetables on the counter and use separate cutting boards to prevent cross contamination. Cook meats, such as beef, poultry and fish, until they are no longer pink in the center or opaque (fish only). Eggs should be cooked so that they are no longer runny and should never be consumed raw. This is important to keep in mind the next time you reach for that spoon of cookie dough, or prepare homemade salad dressings, mayonnaises or frostings. Also, produce should always be washed thoroughly before it is prepared, even if it came from your own garden. Make sure to wash your hands thoroughly if you come in contact with pet feces, especially if the pet has diarrhea. It would be helpful to sanitize parts of the house that may be contaminated by the pet to prevent the spread of bacteria. If you come in contact with a reptile, make sure you wash your hands immediately to prevent the spread of Salmonella infection. Bottom line – washing your hands throughout the day, particularly if you are in a situation where Salmonella could be present will save you many unpleasant trips to the bathroom.

Salmonellosis is an uncomfortable infection from the bacteria, Salmonella, which no one wants to experience. The consumption of foods that are not cooked thoroughly, foods that contain raw animal ingredients or foods that are not properly washed or handled can lead to frequent diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps over the course of four to seven days. On average, six hundred people die each year from Salmonellosis and about 40,000 people in the United States report cases of Salmonella infection, though the estimated number of actual
cases of infection is over one million because most people whose symptoms clear up after a few days do not report their infections (1). Now take another look at that spoonful of cookie dough. Are the five seconds of tasteful pleasure worth the days you will soon have to spend on the toilet with diarrhea? I don’t think so.

References