

Hepatitis E virus

What Hepatitis E is, the ways it can spread and advice on how to avoid it when cooking pork.

Hepatitis E is an infection caused by the hepatitis E virus (also known as HEV). Both humans and animals can be infected by HEV.

For most people, [the symptoms](#) of hepatitis E are mild and clear up within four weeks, but in rare cases the disease can be fatal.

How hepatitis E spreads

Hepatitis E is spread through contact with the faeces or vomit of an infected person.

There is also increasing evidence that the infection may be linked to undercooked pork and pork products. A survey within pig abattoirs found that nearly 6% of pigs had hepatitis E virus in their blood.

Avoiding hepatitis E when cooking pork

We advise that all whole cuts of pork, pork products and offal should be thoroughly cooked until:

- they're steaming hot all the way through
- none of the meat is pink when you cut into the thickest part
- any juices run clear

This will reduce the foodborne risk of illness from hepatitis E, other viruses and bacteria that could cause disease. Good hygiene practices including [hand washing](#) and appropriate storage are also important to reduce the risk of [cross-contamination](#) within the kitchen.

FSA EXPLAINS

Viruses are very small and often highly contagious pathogenic agents which cause disease.

Foodborne viruses account for an estimated 18% of the UK's food poisoning incidents – a significant proportion.

Viruses can be spread between people (hosts) in different ways such as through bodily fluids, the gastrointestinal tract and through the air.

Viruses rely on the cellular machinery of hosts (living organisms) to multiply. Some viruses can survive and remain infectious in foods and the environment for prolonged periods of time. Some viruses can survive harsh conditions such as:

- high temperatures
- low temperatures
- acidic or alkaline environments
- UV exposure

What the FSA is doing to keep you safe from hepatitis E

Until recently, people in the UK only usually became infected with hepatitis E if they'd travelled abroad to places with poor sanitation.

We now know that there are more people, particularly immunosuppressed patients, with hepatitis E who haven't travelled abroad. We suspect that these cases may be due to exposure to infectious hepatitis E virus in pork and pork products.

While it's possible to identify the hepatitis E virus in food, we can't tell whether it's infectious and capable of making us ill. We're continuing to research how foodborne hepatitis E virus may be affecting UK consumers.

A key area we need more evidence for is the development of improved detection methods. This is so that we can better assess the risk from hepatitis E virus in the food chain. We'll then be able to take steps to reduce the chances of it reaching our dinner plates.

We know that thorough cooking kills bacteria and viruses, but we're not certain how effective different cooking practices are at eliminating viruses such as hepatitis E from food.

We're planning further work to understand how much heat is required and for how long in order to remove hepatitis E in food. This will enable us to give clear advice on what temperature foods should be cooked at and for how long. This applies in particular to pork and pork products.