



FOCUS on Field Epidemiology

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Collecting Specimens in an Outbreak Investigation

1. Consider a foodborne illness outbreak. Can you think of a situation in which one may not be able to collect food specimens?

It is important to obtain food specimens as soon as possible in a foodborne disease outbreak, since the food may quickly be discarded or eaten.

For example, it is unlikely that any food will be saved following a wedding or buffet, making it problematic, if not impossible, to obtain an actual food sample.

In circumstances where all the food was consumed before the outbreak investigation began, it may be possible to test a different batch or package of food for the suspected pathogen, as was done in the cholera outbreak discussed in this issue of *FOCUS*.

2. Is there a particular laboratory you use for outbreak investigations? If so, how has your communication with them been during the time of specimen collection and processing during an outbreak investigation? Could your communication be improved? If so, how?

One of the most important lessons from this issue is to communicate with the laboratory you will be working with during an outbreak investigation *before* you collect specimens. Laboratories may use different techniques to isolate organisms, and therefore may have different requirements for specimen collection, packaging, and transport.

It may be impossible (due to time, money, ethics, and/or logistics) to re-collect a clinical specimen from a person. For this reason, it is imperative that you collect it the correct way the first time.

You might consider contacting laboratories in your area to find out which pathogens they do and do not test for, so you will have this information readily available once an outbreak does occur.



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