What is Staphylococcus?
Staphylococcus aureus is a common bacterium found on the skin and in the nasal passages of up to 25% of healthy people and animals. Staphylococcus aureus is important because it has the ability to make seven different toxins that are frequently responsible for food poisoning.

What is staphylococcal food poisoning?
Staphylococcal food poisoning is a gastrointestinal illness. It is caused by eating foods contaminated with toxins produced by Staphylococcus aureus. The most common way for food to be contaminated with Staphylococcus is through contact with food workers who carry the bacteria or through contaminated milk and cheeses. Staphylococcus is salt tolerant and can grow in salty foods such as ham. As the bacteria multiply in the food, it produces toxins that can cause illness. Staphylococcal toxins are resistant to heat and cannot be destroyed by cooking. Foods at highest risk of contamination with Staphylococcus aureus and subsequent toxin production are those that are made by hand and require no cooking. Some examples of foods that have caused staphylococcal food poisoning are sliced meat, puddings, some pastries and sandwiches.

What are the symptoms of staphylococcal food poisoning?
Staphylococcal toxins are fast acting, sometimes causing illness in as little as 30 minutes. Symptoms usually develop within one to six hours after eating contaminated food. Patients typically experience several of the following: nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, and diarrhea. The illness is usually mild and most patients recover after one to three days. In a small minority of patients the illness may be more severe.

How do I know if I have staphylococcal food poisoning?
Toxin-producing Staphylococcus aureus can be identified in stool or vomit, and toxin can be detected in food items. Diagnosis of staphylococcal food poisoning in an individual is generally based only on the signs and symptoms of the patient. Testing for the toxin-producing bacteria or the toxin is not usually done in individual patients. Testing is usually reserved for outbreaks involving several persons. If you think you may have food poisoning, contact your physician.

How should a patient with suspected staphylococcal food poisoning be treated?
For most patients, staphylococcal food poisoning will cause a brief illness. The best treatments for these patients are rest, plenty of fluids, and medicines to calm their stomachs. Highly susceptible patients, such as the young and the elderly, are more likely to have severe illness requiring intravenous fluids and care in a hospital. Antibiotics are not useful in treating this illness. The toxin is not affected by antibiotics.

Is a sick patient infectious?
Patients with this illness are not contagious. Toxins are not transmitted from one person to another.
How can staphylococcal food poisoning be prevented?
- It is important to prevent the contamination of food with Staphylococcus before the toxin can be produced.
- Wash hands and under fingernails vigorously with soap and water before handling and preparing food.
- Do not prepare food if you have a nose or eye infection.
- Do not prepare or serve food for others if you have wounds or skin infections on your hands or wrists.
- Keep kitchens and food-serving areas clean and sanitized.
- If food is to be stored longer than two hours, keep hot foods hot (over 140°F) and cold foods cold (40°F or under).
- Store cooked food in a wide, shallow container and refrigerate as soon as possible.

Could staphylococcal toxins be used in a bioterrorist attack?
Staphylococcal toxins could be used as a biological agent either by contamination of food/water or by aerosolization and inhalation. Breathing in low doses of staphylococcal enterotoxin B may cause fever, cough, difficulty breathing, headache, and some vomiting and nausea. High doses of the toxin have a much more serious effect.