



E.coli O157

What is E.coli ?

- E.coli is a bacterium found naturally in the intestines of people and animals.
- Most strains of E. coli are harmless and do not cause illness. However E. coli O157 is a strain that produces a toxin that can cause severe illness, particularly in the young, elderly and immuno-compromised.
- Infection with E.coli O157 is rare but increasing. Unlike some other food poisoning germs, it does not usually affect large numbers of people; however, when it does occur it is common to find that one or two family members are affected at the same time, but their symptoms may vary in severity.

Where does it come from and how is it spread?

- People usually become infected with E coli O157 by eating contaminated food or through contact with infected animals or their faeces.
- The organism can live in the intestines of healthy animals. Contamination of meat occurs during the slaughtering process when the intestine may be damaged. Eating meat, particularly products such as minced meat or burgers, that are rare or undercooked is a common way of becoming infected.
- Consuming unpasteurised milk/dairy products, or milk which has become contaminated after pasteurisation may lead to infection with E.coli..
- Other sources known to have caused infection include unpeeled/unwashed fruit/salad/vegetables which may have been fertilised with infected manure - also unpasteurised apple cider.
- Direct contact with infected farm animals or their faeces e.g. cattle, deer, goats, sheep etc. Indirect contact via clothing contaminated with cattle faeces and domestic animals.
- Swimming in, swallowing or drinking untreated or sewage contaminated water.
- The bacteria may also be present in the faeces of an infected person and may be spread person to person.



The illness

How does it make us ill?

- In order to become ill, a person must swallow some of the bacteria which may come from any of the sources listed above.

What are the symptoms?

- Symptoms can begin 1-14 days after exposure.
- Symptoms range from stomach cramps, fever and diarrhoea to more serious bloody diarrhoea (haemorrhagic colitis). Severity is dependant upon how the individual reacts to the organism.
- Most people recover with or without specific treatment after 5-10 days.
- In a small number of people complications can occur that require urgent hospital treatment. The two main types of complication are:
 - Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome (HUS); which involves damage, breakdown and eventually total failure of the kidneys. A typical indication of this is blood in the urine.
 - Thrombotic Thrombocytopenic Purpura (TTP). This causes blood clots to form in the small blood vessels all around the body. This reduces the amount of platelets generally available which can lead to bleeding under the skin and purple coloured spots. If blood clots occur in the brain they can cause seizures and coma.
- Although the vast majority of people make a full and complete recovery, a very small number are left with some damage to their kidneys and, if the complications develop, some die.



What happens if I think I have E.coli O157?

- Infection can be diagnosed by detecting the bacterium in stool specimens (faeces). See your Doctor immediately if you think that you or a member of your family may have this infection.
- If food handlers; health care and day care workers, or young children at nursery or school have the E.coli O157 infection, advice should be sought on exclusion from work, school or day care groups etc. from the Environmental Health department or your Doctor.



What can I do to prevent it ?

- Eat only thoroughly cooked minced meat products and burgers. When cooking, ensure that the juices run clear and there are no pink bits remaining. Send back undercooked minced meat products or burgers if you are not happy.
- Consume only pasteurised milk and dairy products.
- Eliminate cross-contamination by keeping and preparing raw foods separate from cooked or ready-to-eat foods. Ensure that chopping boards, utensils and hands are thoroughly washed between contact with raw foods and cooked.
- Wash or peel all fruit, vegetables and salad before eating.
- Supervise children on visits to farms etc. Ensure that hands are thoroughly washed with soap and running hot water after contact with animals, before eating, before leaving the farm etc. Clean or change boots before leaving the farm. Cover cuts and wounds. Eat picnics/snacks well away from areas where animals are kept or allowed to roam.
- Never drink/swallow untreated, or sewage contaminated, water. Take care if playing in rivers or streams.
- Ensure that household members practise high standards of personal hygiene and wash their hands thoroughly with soap and hot running water before and after handling foods, before eating, after using the toilet, changing babies' nappies, disposing of rubbish, or touching pets.
- If someone in your household is ill, disinfect the toilet at regular intervals throughout the day (including flush handles, wash hand basins, taps and door handles etc).

For further advice on E.coli O157 contact Colchester Borough Council's Food and Safety Team on 01206 282581 or email food.safety@colchester.gov.uk