



Escherichia coli (E. coli)

What is it?

E.coli 0157:H7 is a strain of E.coli that produces a toxin and can cause severe illness. Most other strains of E.coli are harmless and live in the intestines of healthy animals and humans.

How is it spread?

People usually become infected with E.coli 0157:H7 by eating contaminated food. Eating meat (especially ground beef) that is rare or undercooked is the most common way of becoming infected. Drinking unpasteurized milk and swimming in or drinking sewage-contaminated water can also cause infection.

The bacteria are present in an infected person's feces and may also be spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms and when do they occur?

Symptoms may develop from two to 10 days after eating contaminated food but can range from three to four days. E.coli 0157:H7 causes severe stomach cramps with diarrhea, often bloody, nausea and occasionally vomiting, but usually no fever. Most people recover without specific treatment in five to 10 days.

Haemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) is a serious complication that occurs in some infected people, particularly children under five and the elderly. In this syndrome, red blood cells are destroyed and kidney failure occurs.

When is a person infectious?

A person is infectious as long as bacteria are excreted in his or her stool, usually for a week or less in adults but up to three weeks in one-third of children.

Recommended Absence

Food handlers, health care workers, and children and staff of child care centres should contact the Health Unit to get specific instructions if they have been in contact with someone who has an E. coli 0157:H7 infection.

How can I protect myself and prevent the spread?

Infection with E. coli 0157:H7 can be prevented the following ways:

- Adults with E. coli 0157:H7 or E. coli-like symptoms should not use recreational water venues, such as pools, for two weeks after symptoms are gone and four weeks for children unless laboratory test is negative.
- Beef and pork products should be cooked to an internal temperature of 71 C° (160 F°). Chicken products and hazardous food mixtures should be cooked to 74 C° (165 F°), and whole poultry should be cooked until 82 C° (180 F°).
- Only consume milk and apple cider that has been pasteurized.
- Eliminate cross-contamination from raw foods to cooked ones by thorough washing of cutting boards, utensils, and hands, and by discarding used meat packages.
- Avoid sewage-contaminated water.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water before and after handling foods, before eating, and after using the toilet or changing diapers.
- Clean bathroom taps, toilets and doorknobs at least once every day with an antiseptic cleaner such as bleach and water (one part bleach to 10 parts water). If possible, designate a separate bathroom for a sick person to use.

E.coli 0157:H7 must be reported to the Medical Officer of Health as per the Health Protection and Promotion Act.

For more information, please contact a member of Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit's Infectious Disease Team.

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