

What is *E.coli* O157?

E.coli are a type of bacteria found in the human intestine, most of which are quite harmless. However, *E.coli* O157 produce toxins that can cause severe disease in man. There are also other types of *E.coli* which cause the same symptoms, and all are known as VTEC.

What illness results?

E.coli O157 can cause a range of symptoms, from mild diarrhoea to bloody diarrhoea. A small number of people develop complications such as kidney damage, and problems with blood clotting, both of which require urgent hospital treatment.

Where does *E.coli* O157 come from?

The main source of infection is the intestine of healthy cattle, but it has also been found in the intestines of sheep, horses, farmed deer, goats, dogs, and wild birds.

How does it spread?

- Direct contact with infected animals, or their faeces
- Eating undercooked meat
- Drinking unpasteurised dairy products

- Drinking water that is contaminated with animal faeces – this is more likely to occur with private supplies, or stream water
- Eating unwashed/unpeeled fruit or vegetables that are contaminated with infected manure
- Contact with the faeces of an infected person

Only very small numbers of the bacteria are needed to cause illness.

The incubation period, which is the time from first swallowing the bacteria to becoming ill, can range from 1 to 14 days, but is usually 3 to 4 days.

Should I see my GP?

You should consult your GP if one or more of the following applies to you:

- there is blood in your diarrhoea
- you have severe abdominal pain
- the diarrhoea has lasted for 48 hours

How are infections treated?

There is no specific treatment, and antibiotics are not useful. It is important to drink plenty to make sure that you don't become dehydrated. Clear fluids like water and diluted fruit juice are recommended. Your GP may wish to do some blood tests to make sure no complications are developing.

You will be visited by an officer from Environmental Health who will try to find out where the infection may have come from.

How can infection be prevented?

- Wash hands thoroughly after contact with all animals and their faeces
- If you work with animals launder your overalls separately, and remove work footwear before going into the house
- Wash hands after using the toilet or changing nappies
- Make sure meat is always thoroughly cooked
- Use separate chopping boards for cooked and uncooked meats, and raw vegetables
- Store cooked meats in the fridge separately from raw meat
- Avoid drinking unpasteurised milk
- Never drink from streams or rivers
- Owners of private water supplies should ensure they are properly maintained. Advice can be obtained from your local Environmental Health Officer
- If you or a member of your family have *E.coli* O157 infection, make sure the toilet and bathroom fittings (e.g. door handles) are cleaned and disinfected thoroughly

All persons with diarrhoea should remain off work or school until they have had no symptoms for 48 hours.

There are certain groups of people (for example, food handlers, healthcare workers, young children), who may have to remain off work or school until stool samples have been tested to show that they are no longer carrying *E.coli* O157.

How should hands be washed?

Always use warm, running water and a mild, preferably liquid, soap. (It is not necessary to use soaps labelled as antiseptic or antibacterial.)

- Wet hands and apply a small amount of soap
- Rub hands together vigorously for 10-15 seconds
- Pay special attention to areas between fingers, finger tips, and palms.
- Rinse hands under warm running water
- Dry thoroughly on a clean dry towel.

For further information see:
www.foodstandards.gov.uk

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