

E. COLI O157:H7 INFECTIONS

What is *E. coli* O157:H7?

E. coli O157:H7 are bacteria that can cause bloody diarrhea. The "E" in *E. coli* is short for Escherichia. The term "O157:H7" indicates a specific type of *E. coli* bacteria. Not all strains of *E. coli* cause illness.

What are the symptoms of an *E. coli* O157:H7 infection?

The symptoms usually start within 3-4 days, but the range is 2 to 8 days after exposure. The most common symptoms are stomach cramps and bloody diarrhea. Sometimes persons will also have fever, chills and vomiting. Some persons will not have any symptoms, or they may have mild diarrhea that is not bloody. In a small number of cases, the infection may cause the kidneys to stop working, especially in young children.

How is *E. coli* O157:H7 spread?

E. coli O157:H7 bacteria may be spread by eating "dirtied" or contaminated water or food (particularly ground beef or raw milk). Infected persons can spread the bacteria by not washing their hands after going to the bathroom and then handling food that other people will eat. Another way to get this disease is by having direct contact with stool (feces) from an infected person or animal and then transferring the bacteria to the mouth from the hands.

How long are people contagious?

An infected person may spread the bacteria to others for as long as the bacteria remain in the stool, usually 1 week but up to 3 weeks or more.

Who gets *E. coli* O157:H7?

Anyone can get *E. coli* O157:H7 but it is recognized more often in children than adults. Because there are many different strains of *E. coli*, people can become re-infected.

What treatment is available for people with *E. coli* O157:H7?

Most *E. coli* O157:H7 infections will go away without treatment. If you have bloody diarrhea, you should see a doctor. Persons who get *E. coli* O157:H7 should not take antibiotics. Persons with diarrhea should drink plenty of fluids.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Since the bacteria is found in stool, children should *not* go to daycare or school while they have diarrhea and food handlers should be excluded from work. Daycare attendees and workers and food handlers should only return to daycare/work after 2 negative stool culture results.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting *E. coli* O157:H7?

- Wash hands frequently with water and soap, and especially after using the toilet, changing a diaper, or before preparing and/or eating food. (Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.)
- Avoid food or water from sources that may be contaminated
- Wash raw fruits and vegetables prior to eating or chopping
- Always treat raw poultry, beef and pork as if they are contaminated and handle accordingly
- Wrap fresh meats in plastic bags at the market to prevent blood from dripping on other foods
- Refrigerate foods promptly; minimize time kept at room temperature
- Immediately wash cutting boards and counters used for preparation to prevent cross contamination with other foods
- Ensure that the correct internal cooking temperature is reached, particularly when cooking using a microwave

