

FACTSHEET 10 – E.coli 0157

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What Is E.coli 0157?

E.coli 0157 (also known as VTEC) is one of many strains of a type of bacteria called Escherichia coli. Most strains are harmless and live in the gut of healthy humans and animals. But E.coli 0157 produces a toxin which causes illnesses ranging from mild diarrhoea through to very severe inflammation of the gut.

What Symptoms Does It Cause?

- It can cause a range of symptoms, from mild diarrhoea to severe abdominal pain and bloody diarrhoea.
- In a small proportion of patients, it can cause haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS) which is a serious condition resulting in kidney failure.
- After being infected by the bacteria it usually takes three to four days before symptoms develop.

How Long Do The Symptoms Last?

- Symptoms can last up to two weeks, but severe complications such as HUS can last longer.
- Most people rid themselves of the bacteria after about a week, although some people, particularly children, may carry E.coli 0157 for several weeks.

How Could I Catch E.coli 0157?

E.coli 0157 is found in the gut of many animals, mainly cattle, but also in the faeces of other animals. You can catch it by:

- Eating contaminated food (e.g. undercooked meat) or drinking unpasteurised milk.
- Contact with infected animals, either directly by touching, or through accidental contact with animal faeces.
- Contact with infected people through not washing hands thoroughly after using the toilet and/or before handling food – particularly at home, in nurseries and infant schools.
- Swimming or playing in contaminated water, such as ponds or streams.
- *Young children are more likely to get infected as they frequently put their hands and objects in their mouths.*

What Should I Not Do While Infected?

- Because only a few bacteria are needed to cause illness, people with E.coli 0157 are very infectious.
- For certain groups, e.g. those whose work involves handling food, you will need to stay off work until stool tests confirm that it is safe to return to work.
- Stool tests are also required for children under five years of age and some older children. Until the test results show that they are no longer an infection risk to others they should not:

- attend school or nursery or mix with other children;
- use public toilets;
- swim in public swimming pools or share paddling pools.
- Where clearance as above is not required, you/your child should stay away from work or school until completely free of symptoms for 48 hours.
- You should also avoid visiting others or having visits to your house during this period.

What Precautions Should Be Taken In The Home?

- Where possible, avoid preparing food for other people while you have symptoms.
- Hand washing is very important for everyone. You should wash your hands thoroughly with soap in running water, then dry them completely. In general, liquid soap and warm water are best.
- Supervise young children washing their hands.
- Everyone must wash their hands after contact with an infected person, particularly after handling their clothes or bedding.
- Always wash hands after going to the toilet, changing babies nappies, before preparing or serving food, or eating meals.
- Do not share towels and nappy changing mats.

Cleaning

- Do not clean soiled items in the kitchen.
- Ideally, use heavy duty domestic rubber gloves (or synthetic ones) and disposable cloths.
- After use, thoroughly wash rubber gloves in hot water and detergent, rinse and allow to dry.
- To dispose of cloths, put in a plastic bag, seal the neck and place in household waste.
- Clean toilet seats, toilet flush handles, basin taps, surfaces and toilet door handles at least daily, preferably more often, using hot water and detergent.
- Disinfectant sprays/wipes may be used on toilet seats and other surfaces but only after any visible soiling has been removed.
- Thick household bleach is very effective. Dilute one part bleach to every 10 parts water for soiled surfaces and one part bleach to every 100 parts water for other hard surfaces.
- Deal with any spillage of faeces immediately. Clean the soiled area with hot water and detergent using heavy duty domestic rubber or synthetic gloves. Then disinfect as above.
- Wash soiled clothing and bed linen separately from other clothes in a domestic washing machine at the highest temperature possible.
- Wipe down the outside of the washing machine with hot water and detergent after any heavily soiled load.