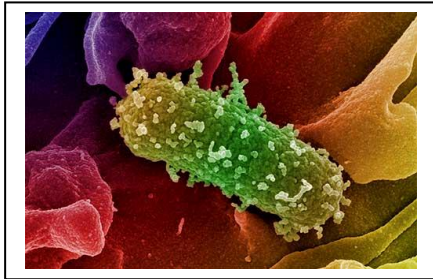




# Food safety advice

## E Coli 0157



### WHAT DOES INFECTION WITH E. COLI O157 MEAN?

E coli are a family of bacteria which are commonly found in the bowel of humans. There are several different strains of E. Coli but one particular strain, called E. Coli O157, can cause infection which can sometimes lead to very serious illness, especially in vulnerable groups such as very young children and the elderly.

Infection with E. Coli O157 is rare and 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 usually vary in severity.

### WHERE DOES IT COME FROM AND HOW IS IT SPREAD?

It is only within the last 15 years that this particular strain of bacteria has been recognised as a serious cause of human infection. There is still some uncertainty about all the ways that this bacteria can be spread.

We do know that it takes very few bacteria to produce illness and that infections have been caused by the following:

- Eating undercooked meat, especially minced beef produced as burgers.
- Drinking unpasteurised milk, or milk which has been contaminated after pasteurisation.
- Direct contact with infected animals, especially cattle and deer.
- Water supplies contaminated with faeces; this is more likely to occur with private supplies.



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- Eating unwashed, unpeeled vegetables or fruit fertilised with infected manure.
- Indirect contact with infected animals eg via domestic animals such as dogs or cats, and via items of clothing contaminated with cattle faeces.

## HOW DOES IT MAKE US ILL?

In order to become ill a person must swallow some of the bacteria; this can occur after having direct contact with an infected person who may pass it on by failing to wash their hands properly after going to the toilet or before preparing food or through any of the methods listed above.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

There are a range of symptoms that can occur and these will depend on how many bacteria have been swallowed and on how the individual concerned reacts to the organism.

The incubation period, which is the time between swallowing the bacteria until the first symptoms appear, is usually 2 to 7 days, although it can be as short as 1 day and as long as 14 days.

When the patient becomes unwell it is usually with stomach cramps, fever and diarrhoea. The illness may clear at this stage but occasionally the disease progresses to the next stage where the diarrhoea becomes bloody. A small number of people may then go on to produce complications such as kidney damage and disorders of blood clotting; which require urgent hospital treatment.

The vast majority of people make a full and complete recovery but a very small number of patients are left with some residual damage to their kidneys. This infection has caused deaths but this is rare with modern treatment.



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## WHAT HAPPENS IF I HAVE E. COLI O157?

You, or any member of your family who has this infection will receive care from your general practitioner (GP) and others the same as for any illness. In addition, the infection will be notified to the Consultant for Communicable Disease Control at the Health Protection Agency and to the Food Safety Team at the City Council. These will work together to investigate episodes of food poisoning, and you will be visited by either the Public Health Doctor or the Environmental Health Officer who will try to find out where your infection has come from. He or she will be able to give guidance on preventing further spread to others.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT IT?

- Wash hands after using the toilet or changing a child's nappy and before handling cooked food, especially if you have been preparing raw meats.
- Ensure children and adults wash their hands as soon as possible after handling farm animals and pets.
- Make sure meats are thoroughly cooked before eating. Frozen foods should always be properly thawed before cooking.
- Use separate knives, chopping boards, work surfaces etc, for cooked and uncooked meats or thoroughly wash them before re-using, especially if they have previously been used for raw meats.
- Store cooked meats in the fridge separately from raw meats. Raw foods should not be stored above or beside cooked food.
- Avoid drinking unpasteurised milk and never drink untreated water from streams or rivers.
- Owners of private water supplies should have them regularly inspected, monitored and maintained.
- Should you or a member of your family already have E. Coli O157 infection then thorough cleaning of the toilet including the bowl, seat and flush handle, the sink, taps and door handle with disinfectant is important to prevent any cross-infection between members of the family.
- If you or a member of your family has illness as a result of E. Coli O157 it may be necessary to stay away from work, school, nursery, playgroups or mother and toddler groups until the diarrhoea has stopped **completely** for at least 2 days and you are fully recovered, as the infection can be passed on to others when symptoms are present.