

E.COLI O157

(Vero cytotoxin-producing E.coli VTEC)

Your Questions Answered

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EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

What is E.Coli

It is one of the bacteria that live naturally in the human or animal gut. There are many strains and most of these are harmless. However, some like E.coli O157 can cause food poisoning. The main source of these harmful strains is cattle and other farm animals.

How do I know that I have E.coli O157?

E.Coli O157 can only be confirmed by testing a sample of your faeces (not urine) at the request of your doctor or environmental health officer.

How is it spread?

Because E.coli is found naturally in farm animals, their meat and milk may be contaminated. You can then get the infection from eating food such as undercooked beef burgers, untreated milk or dairy products. Animals may also contaminate water sources and raw vegetables washed or watered from these sources can transmit the bacteria.

You only need to take in a small number of bacteria to become infected. Person to person spread can thus occur very easily. This is especially so between young children.

What are the symptoms?

It can cause diarrhoea, sometimes bloody, and abdominal pain. The infection can range from mild to very serious, particularly in children under 5 years. If the diarrhoea continues or turns bloody you should seek medical advice quickly. A very few cases may go on to develop extreme illness, which may lead to kidney failure.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms start between 2 to 8 days after exposure. The average is 3-4 days.

How long is a person able to spread the infection?

Infected people can carry E.coli O157 in their faeces and gut for many weeks, especially in the case of young children.

Do infected people need to stay away from work or school?

E.coli O157 is regarded as very infectious. All infected people must stay away from work or school until diarrhoea has ceased and bowel habits have been normal (without medication) for at least 48 hours. Inform your employer, child carer or school as soon as possible to help them identify if they may have an outbreak.

If you belong to one of the following 'high risk' groups, additional precautions are needed & you have a duty to report your illness to your employer, child carer or school.

- food handlers involved with unwrapped or ready-to-eat food
- staff of health care facilities in contact with food or patients
- children aged below 5 years attending nurseries, playgroups, etc
- older children and adults who may find it difficult to carry out good personal hygiene

Infected people in these groups must not return to work, school, nursery, etc until 2 faecal samples taken at least 48 hours apart have been found clear of the E.coli bacteria. This testing also applies to people in these groups who have been in contact with an infected person (such as within a household) but have not yet shown any symptoms themselves.

It is very important to get in touch with us if you, or anyone else in your household, are in one of these 'high risk' groups. This is to enable us to give any necessary advice to halt the potential spread of the illness.

Visitors

It is strongly recommended you do not have any visitors (this includes friends, family and your children's friends) into your home until everyone within your home has fully recovered and the appropriate testing has confirmed the infection has totally cleared. This is particularly important for children under the age of 5 or older children/adults who are unable to carry out good personal hygiene.

How long is a person able to spread the infection?

Infected people can spread E.Coli 0157 in their faeces for many weeks, especially in the case of young children. If the diarrhoea continues or turns bloody you should seek medical advice quickly. A very few cases may go onto develop extreme illness, which may lead to kidney failure.

How can I prevent it spreading?

Hand washing is the most important factor in preventing the spread of infection. Thoroughly wash your hands with soap under warm running water:

- AFTER using or cleaning the toilet
- AFTER touching anything contaminated by diarrhoea or vomiting
- AFTER attending to anybody who is unwell
- AFTER handling dirty laundry, clothing or bedding
- AFTER handling used nappies
- BEFORE handling, preparing, serving, or consuming food or drink
- AFTER touching animals during visits at farms, wildlife parks, zoos, pet corners, etc

People who are ill should ideally use anti-bacterial liquid soap and separate towels or disposable paper tissues. A nailbrush can assist you to clean under your fingernails. Always dry your hands properly as this helps to remove bacteria. Young children should be assisted to ensure they wash their hands properly.

Cleaning the toilet

For as long as people are unwell:

- Disinfect the toilet seat after each use, using a separate cloth
- Wash and disinfect other items like bedpans or potties after each use
- Disinfect the door handle, wash hand basin taps and flush handle after use

Laundry

- Dirty laundry from persons with food poisoning should be kept separate from other laundry
- If possible remove any heavy soiling into the toilet before washing
- Wash soiled clothing and bedding separately on as hot a washing programme as possible without exceeding fabric care instructions

Food Safety Points to remember

- ALWAYS keep raw meat separate from other foods
- ALWAYS cook meat thoroughly, including at barbecues. This is normally until the juices run clear
- AVOID eating or drinking untreated milk or dairy products, or drinking untreated water

**REMEMBER TO WASH YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY
ASSIST YOUNG CHILDREN TO WASH THEIR HANDS PROPERLY
MAKE SURE EVERYBODY FOLLOWS THESE PRECAUTIONS**

Further advice is available by contacting your Doctor or from:

East Cambridgeshire District Council
Environmental Services
The Grange
Nutholt Lane
Ely, Cambs CB7 4EE
Tel: 01353 665555
Fax: 01353 616223