

E. coli O157



What is E. coli O157?

Escherichia coli O157, is the most common type of Verocytotoxin-producing Escherichia coli (VTEC). E. coli is a type of bacteria. Symptoms include diarrhoea, bloody diarrhoea, and abdominal pains. Infection can be asymptomatic or can have serious complications. Young children and the elderly are at particular risk of complications.

Who is affected?

In 2000 in England and Wales there were about 900 cases. Children under 5 are most commonly affected. More cases are reported in summer and early autumn and there are higher rates in rural areas and Scotland.

How do you catch it?

E. coli is found in the intestines of animals, particularly cattle. People can catch it by eating contaminated food, especially undercooked mince, and by drinking unpasteurized milk or contaminated water. Fruit and vegetables can also be contaminated. It can be caught during farm visits and by person-to-person spread due to poor hygiene within families or institutions, especially where young children are present.

How is it diagnosed?

It is diagnosed by culture and examination of a stool sample, followed by further confirmatory laboratory tests.

Is there any treatment?

Most people get better without specific treatment within two weeks. Extra fluids are important, especially if you have diarrhoea. Be particularly careful with babies, children, pregnant women and the elderly. Anti-diarrhoeal agents are not recommended. If you develop complications, then you are likely to need hospital treatment.

How long am I infectious for?

Adults are infectious for up to one week and children for up to three weeks after the symptoms have resolved.

What about going to work/school?

The following groups should remain at home until two consecutive negative stool samples have been taken at least 48 hours apart:

- ◆ people working in the food and catering business.
- ◆ staff of healthcare facilities, particularly those looking after or serving food to infants, the elderly or the debilitated.
- ◆ children aged less than five years old who attend nurseries or playgroups.
- ◆ older children or adults who find it difficult to implement good standards of personal hygiene eg. those with learning disabilities or special needs.

If you do not fall into one of these groups, stay at home until your stools return to normal. If you are a household contact of a case and fall into one of the above risk groups you will need to discuss with the Environmental Health Officer or your doctor how long you should remain at home even if you have no symptoms.

How can I prevent giving this infection to someone else?

- ◆ Don't prepare or handle food for other people until you have been symptom-free for 48 hours.
- ◆ If cleaning up diarrhoea/vomit, wash the surface with hot soapy water, before rinsing and allowing to dry. Paper towels or disposable cloths should be used for cleaning.
- ◆ Clean toilet bowls and seats, flush handles, door handles and taps at least daily with a household cleaner before rinsing and allowing to dry. Use disposable cloths.
- ◆ Soiled clothing and bedding should be washed on a hot cycle. Articles that are heavily soiled can be soaked beforehand in a disinfectant. After loading the washing machine wipe the outer surface with a disinfectant.
- ◆ Wear rubber gloves when cleaning the toilet, cleaning up vomit or diarrhoea and loading the washing machine with soiled clothing.
- ◆ Set aside a towel for your own personal use.
- ◆ Avoid swimming in recreational water until at least two weeks after the symptoms have stopped.

How can it be prevented?

- ◆ Hand washing is the most important part of infection control. Wash hands thoroughly with hot soapy water after using or cleaning the toilet, changing a baby's nappy, attending to a patient, touching soiled materials, handling raw meat, dealing with animals and before preparing and eating food. Dry your hands thoroughly.
- ◆ Keep raw meat separate from cooked food and ready-to-eat food at all times. Never store raw meat above other food in the fridge.
- ◆ Meat, especially mince, should be cooked thoroughly, until the juices run clear and it is brown on the inside. Be especially careful with beef burgers and at barbecues.
- ◆ Wash utensils, chopping boards and surfaces thoroughly with hot water and washing up liquid after dealing with raw meat to avoid cross-contamination of ready-to-eat foods.
- ◆ Wash all fruit and vegetables in running water.
- ◆ Avoid unpasteurized milk and juice.

- ◆ When visiting farms make sure that children's hand washing is supervised. Hands must be washed after touching animals and on leaving the farm. Do not let the children eat or drink when visiting the animals, prevent the animals from touching the children's faces, stop the children from putting their hands to their mouths and clean their shoes after the visit.
- ◆ Only drink treated water. Avoid swallowing recreational water.

What is notification?

E. coli O157 is a notifiable disease, which means that your doctor is legally obliged to inform the Environmental Health Department of your case. An Environmental Health Officer or Consultant of Communicable Disease Control will contact you to identify the source of contamination and help you prevent further spread of infection.

Where can I get more information?

Talk to your general practitioner (GP) or for further information or to raise a question please access www.birmingham.gov.uk or telephone 0121 303 6007.