

E.coli 0157 Fact Sheet

What is E coli 0157?

E coli O157 are bacteria, which can cause a range of illnesses from mild diarrhoea through to a very severe inflammation of the gut.

What are the symptoms of E.coli 0157?

After swallowing the bacteria it may take between one and six days before you become ill. In some people it may be as long as 14 days before symptoms develop.

People infected by the E.coli 0157 bacteria can develop a range of symptoms:

- Diarrhoea – about 50% of people also have blood in their stools
- Stomach cramps
- Fever

Some infected people may have mild diarrhoea or no symptoms at all. A very small number of patients may develop kidney problems.

Where does the E. coli 0157 infection come from?

E. coli 0157 are found in the gut of some cattle and other farm animals and can contaminate meat at the time of slaughtering.

How do I catch E.coli 0157?

The infection is caused by eating food containing the bacteria particularly beef products, such as undercooked beef burgers or beef mince, unpasteurised milk and cheese and unwashed vegetables.

Infection may also follow contact with infected animals, particularly at farms and animal sanctuaries.

The bacteria can spread from person to person through inadequate hand-washing after using the toilet and/or before food-handling, particularly in households, nurseries and infant schools.

How will I know if I have E.coli 0157?

You should always tell your doctor if you, or a member of your family have diarrhoea which lasts for more than 24 hours especially if blood is present. Your doctor may ask you to provide a stool sample. This will be tested in a laboratory. The result will take a few days.

How can E.coli 0157 be prevented?

It is important to handle all food safely:

- cooked and uncooked meats separate,
- cooking all poultry and minced beef products thoroughly.
- washing all salads and vegetables to be eaten raw.
- avoid drinking unpasteurised milk and eating unpasteurised dairy products.

Personal hygiene is also very important:

- thorough hand washing and drying after using the toilet, handling raw meat, before meals and after contact with animals.
- supervision of hand washing for children on farm visits.

How long should I stay off work / school if I have E coli 0157?

- Most adults and children over five years who have good standards of personal hygiene can go back to work/school 48 hours after the first normal stool.
- People who work with food must tell their employer of their illness, and must stay off work until 2 further stool tests at least 48 hours apart show that the bacteria have cleared. You must tell your employer about your illness.
- People working with vulnerable groups e.g. the young, elderly or those in poor health, must tell their employer about the illness and must stay off work until 2 further stool tests at least 48 hours apart show that the bacteria have cleared.
- Likewise, children under 5 should stay away from nurseries, playgroups, etc until shown to be clear of the bacteria.

Who cares if I have E coli 0157?

Your doctor and your local Environmental Health Officer care.

You should contact your doctor if you are suffering with diarrhoea and you have blood in your stools. They will be able to advise on the necessary treatment required.

You will be contacted by your local Environmental Health Officer (EHO). They will ask a short series of questions to attempt to find out where you might have picked up the illness. The EHO will advise you about personal hygiene and the need to stay off work etc. They will probably also arrange for your family or other close contacts to have stool samples tested in the laboratory, to check whether they are carrying the bacteria.

For further information and advice, please contact:

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