

# ***E. coli* O157:H7 Fact Sheet**

## ***E. coli* O157:H7 is one of many strains of the bacterium *Escherichia coli***

Most strains of *E. coli* are harmless and live in the intestines of healthy animals and humans. *E. coli* O157:H7 is a strain of *E. coli* that produces a toxin and can cause severe illness.

## **People usually become infected with *E. coli* O157:H7 by eating contaminated food**

The organism can live in the intestines of healthy cattle. Eating meat (especially ground beef) that is rare or undercooked is the most common way of becoming infected. Drinking unpasteurized milk or juices, and drinking or swimming in sewage-contaminated water can also cause infection. The bacteria are present in an infected person's feces (stool) and may be spread from person to person.

## ***E. coli* O157:H7 can cause severe bloody diarrhea and abdominal cramps**

Sometimes infection causes nonbloody diarrhea or no symptoms. Symptoms begin 2 to 8 days after exposure. Hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) is a serious complication that occurs in some infected people, particularly children under 5 and the elderly. In this syndrome, red blood cells are destroyed and kidney failure occurs.

## **Infection can be diagnosed by detecting the bacterium in the stool**

Your health care provider can request a special culture for *E. coli* O157:H7 from a laboratory.

## **See your doctor if you think you may have this infection**

- Most people recover without specific treatment in 5 to 10 days. Fluid and electrolyte replacement is important when diarrhea is watery or there are signs of dehydration. Antidiarrheal agents should be avoided. Antibiotics may actually worsen the disease.
- HUS is a life-threatening condition that is usually treated in an intensive care unit.
- If foodhandlers, health care and child care workers, children in child care, or anyone in the family of such people have an *E. coli* O157:H7 infection, they should contact their local health department to get specific recommendations.

## **Infection with *E. coli* O157:H7 can be prevented by:**

- Eat only thoroughly cooked meats and poultry (using a meat thermometer is the only way to ensure that food is thoroughly cooked).
- Consume only pasteurized milk and dairy products.
- Eliminate cross-contamination from raw foods to cooked ones by thoroughly washing cutting boards and utensils, and by discarding used meat packages.
- Avoid sewage-contaminated water.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap before and after handling foods, before eating, and after using the toilet or changing diapers.