



Escherichia coli O157:H7 Fact Sheet

What is E. coli O157:H7?

E. coli O157: H7 is a bacterium that can cause bloody diarrhea. It usually occurs in the summer. The term “O157:H7” indicates a particular type of E. coli bacteria.

Who can be infected?

Anyone can become infected with E. coli O157:H7.

How are the bacteria spread?

The bacteria are spread by eating or drinking food or water that is contaminated by the feces (stool) of infected people or animals. Poorly cooked meat, especially ground beef, or raw milk can also contain the bacteria. Washing hands after using the toilet and before preparing food is the best way to stop the spread of the bacteria.

What are the symptoms of E. coli O157:H7 infection?

The major symptom is diarrhea, which can look like bloody water. Stomach cramps and chills may occur but fever is not usually present.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The symptoms usually start 2 to 6 days after infection.

Can E. coli O157:H7 infection cause severe problems?

Rarely, the infection can cause the kidneys to stop working, especially in young children.

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Where are E. coli O157:H7 found?

E coli O157:H7 bacteria can be found in humans and in cows. Infected animals may contaminate meat products, water supplies, milk, and other food items.

How long can an infected person spread E. coli O157:H7?

An infected person with diarrhea can spread the bacteria to others for as long as the diarrhea lasts.

Should infected people be excluded from school or work?

Since the bacteria are passed in the feces, people with diarrhea (especially children in day care, health care workers, or people who handle food) should not go to school or work. After diarrhea ends, persons may return to work or school but they should carefully wash their hands after using the toilet.

What is the treatment for E. coli O157:H7 infection?

Most people get well on their own. Persons with diarrhea should drink plenty of liquids. Antibiotics can be used to treat severe cases.

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How can the spread of E. coli O157:H7 infection be stopped?

1. Always refrigerate meat products. Never leave raw meats at room temperature.
2. Always cook meat completely. Never eat raw meat.
3. Avoid drinking unpasteurized milk.
4. Carefully wash hands before and after preparing food.
5. Make sure children wash their hands carefully, especially after using the toilet or handling pets.
6. Always wash hands with soap and warm water after using the toilet or changing diapers.
7. Do not prepare food for others while having diarrhea.

For further information, contact the
Oklahoma City-County Health
Department (405) 425-4437

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