



## Escherichia coli (E. coli) Fact Sheet

### What is E. coli?

E. coli is a bacterium that lives in the intestines of people and animals. Most E. coli are harmless, but some can cause illness. The E. coli that can cause illness can be transmitted through contaminated water or food, or through contact with animals or other people. The most commonly identified E. coli in North America is E. coli O157:H7. It usually occurs in the summer. The term "O157:H7," indicates a particular type of E. coli.

### Who can be infected?

Anyone can become infected with E. coli. Very young children and the elderly are more likely to develop severe illness than others, but anyone can become seriously ill.

### How are the bacteria spread?

E. coli is 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 infection?

Symptoms vary, but often include severe stomach cramps, diarrhea (often bloody), and vomiting. Most people get better within 5 to 7 days.

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### **How soon after infection do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms usually begin 3-4 days after the exposure but may be as short as 1 day or as long as 10 days.

Symptoms tend to get worse as the infection progresses.

### **Can E. coli infection cause severe problems?**

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

### **Where is E. coli found?**

E. coli bacteria can be found in humans and animals such as cattle, deer, and pigs. The major source of human infection is cattle. Infected animals may contaminate meat products, water supplies, milk, and other food items.

### **How long can an infected person spread E. coli?**

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 is passed in an infected person's 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.

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### What is the treatment for a E. coli infection?

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

### How can the spread of E. coli infection be stopped?

To prevent the spread of E. coli, always refrigerate meat products and never leave raw meats at room temperature. Cook meat completely and avoid eating eat raw meat. Avoid drinking unpasteurized milk. It is also important to wash hands before and after preparing food. Ensure children wash their hands, especially after using the toilet or handling pets. Always wash hands with soap and warm water after using the toilet or changing diapers. Do not prepare foods for others while having diarrhea.

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

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