



## ***Escherichia coli* 0157:H7 (*E.coli* O157:H7)**

### **What is *E.COLI* 0157:H7?**

*E.coli* is a bacterium that normally lives in the intestines of humans and animals. Although most types of these bacteria are harmless, several produce toxins that cause illness. Some strains of *E. coli*, including *E. coli* O157:H7, produce toxins known as Shiga toxins and are called "Shiga toxin-producing" *E. coli* (STEC). These may cause severe diarrhea and kidney damage. The most common STEC in North America is *E. coli* O157:H7.

### **Who gets *E.coli* 0157:H7 infection?**

Anyone can become infected with *E.coli* 0157:H7, but children and the elderly are more likely to develop serious complications.

### **What are the symptoms of *E.coli* 0157:H7 infection?**

The symptoms usually appear about 3-4 days after exposure but may be as short as one day or as long as 10 days. Most identified people develop diarrhea (often bloody), severe abdominal cramps, and vomiting. Fever may or may not be present. Some infected people may have mild diarrhea or no symptoms at all. In some people, particularly children under five years of age, the infection causes a complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). This is a serious disease in which red blood cells are destroyed and the kidneys fail. Most people with HUS recover completely after medical treatment, but it can be fatal.

### **How is *E.coli* 0157:H7 spread?**

The illness is acquired by eating food or drinking water containing the bacteria. The bacteria can be found in the intestines of some cattle, and contamination of the meat may occur in the slaughtering process. Eating meat (especially ground beef) that is rare or inadequately cooked is a common way of getting the infection. Infection can also occur by contaminating surfaces and utensils with raw meat then using them for uncooked foods without washing. This is called cross-contamination. In addition, vegetables, fruits, unpasteurized (raw) milk, and unpasteurized fruit juices can be contaminated. Person-to-person transmission can occur if infected people do not wash their hands after using the toilet.

### **How can *E.coli* 0157:H7 infection be treated?**

Most people recover without treatment within 5-7 days. Persons with bloody diarrhea should consult a physician. Antibiotics and medications like Imodium should not be given to persons suspected of having *E.coli* 0157:H7 or persons with bloody diarrhea because these may increase the risk of HUS. It is important to avoid dehydration by drinking plenty of fluids and notifying your physician of any changes in your condition.

### **How can infections with *E.coli* 0157:H7 be prevented?**

- The single most important way to prevent the spread of disease is careful hand washing after using the restroom, before preparing foods, after handling raw meat, after completion of food preparation and after handling animals or their feces.
- Thoroughly wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Thoroughly cook all food from animal sources, especially ground beef. Use a meat thermometer to assure that the correct internal cooking temperature is reached. The correct temperature is 160°F for beef and pork, and 185°F for poultry.
- Use only pasteurized milk, dairy products, and juices.
- Refrigerate foods promptly; do not hold at room temperature any longer than necessary.
- Wash cutting boards, utensils and food preparation counters with soap and water immediately after use to prevent cross-contamination. Never let raw meat or their juices come in contact with cooked meat or any other food, raw or cooked.
- Avoid swallowing water when swimming or playing in pools, ponds and streams.