

Verotoxin-producing Escherichia coli O157:H7 (VTEC, Hamburger Disease) Information Sheet

What is E.coli O157:H7

E.coli are bacteria that are commonly found in the intestines of humans and animals. There are different types of E.coli, some of which are not harmful to people and some which cause serious illness. It is commonly known as “Hamburger Disease”.

What are the symptoms of VTEC?

Verotoxin-producing Escherichia coli (VTEC) infections usually cause diarrhea, which is often bloody, and severe abdominal cramps. There is generally little or no fever. Some individuals may become infected but display no symptoms.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

After the bacteria are ingested it can take 2 to 8 days, with an average of 3 to 4 days, before symptoms start. The illness usually lasts 7 to 10 days.

This infection is strongly associated with Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS), a leading cause of kidney failure in young children and the elderly. Symptoms of HUS may include irritability, fatigue, paleness of the skin, puffiness around the eyes and ankles, and a decrease in the amount of urine produced. It is important to watch for symptoms of HUS in a child even after a child’s diarrhea starts to clear up.

How do E.coli O157:H7 infections happen?

E.coli O157:H7 bacteria infect the intestines of cattle. When animals are slaughtered, the bacteria contaminate the outer surface of the meat. The bacteria are further mixed into the meat during the grinding process.

How is E.coli spread?

E.coli O157:H7 infections can be spread by many food sources, such as undercooked ground beef, unpasteurized milk and apple cider, ham, turkey, roast beef, sandwich meats, raw vegetables, cheese and contaminated water. Once someone has eaten contaminated food, this infection can be passed from person-to-person, by hand-to-mouth contact (fecal-oral route).

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How to prevent E.coli:

- **Thorough hand washing is the best prevention.** Make sure hands are properly washed after using the toilet, handling diapers, pets, livestock or before preparing food.
- Clean and sanitize counter tops and utensils after contact with raw meats and poultry.
- If possible, separate work areas and utensils for preparing raw and cooked foods.
- Cook ground beef thoroughly to an internal temperature of 70°C, or until the juices run clear and the meat is no longer pink.
- Drink only pasteurized milk and apple cider. Never let youngsters sample milk directly from the animal.
- Keep cold foods at 4°C or lower. Keep hot foods at 60°C or higher.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Drink water from a safe supply.
- If ill with diarrhea, avoid preparing or handling food.