

What is *E. coli* O157:H7?

E. coli are bacteria (germs) that normally live in the intestines of people and animals. Most strains of this germ are harmless, but the strain called *E. coli* O157:H7 can make people sick.

How is *E. coli* O157:H7 spread?

E. coli must be swallowed to cause infection. This can happen by:

- Eating food or drinking water containing human or animal waste
- Eating ground beef that has not been fully cooked (still has pink in it)
- Eating or drinking unpasteurized dairy products
- Placing contaminated hands or objects in the mouth
- Eating fruits or vegetables fertilized with raw cow manure
- Handling soiled diapers
- Coming in contact with other infected people

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

The most common symptoms of *E. coli* are:

- Severe stomach cramps
- Diarrhea

Sometimes the diarrhea turns bloody after two or three days. Some people may vomit or run a fever, but these are less common. Usually there is little or no fever present. These symptoms usually go away by themselves after five to 10 days. In a small number of cases, this strain of *E. coli* can cause a rare but serious problem called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS).

HUS is a disease which destroys the red blood cells and causes the kidneys to fail. It starts about a week after the diarrhea begins. Children under five years of age and the elderly are most at risk for developing HUS. Most people who get HUS will regain their health with no remaining blood or kidney problems.

How soon do infected people get sick?

Symptoms usually begin within three or four days after swallowing the bacteria. It may take up to eight days for symptoms to start.

Can *E. coli* O157:H7 be spread from person to person?

Yes, *E. coli* can be spread from person to person. A person who is sick with *E. coli* should not handle food or care for patients, children or the elderly.

How is *E. coli* O157:H7 treated?

There is no treatment for *E. coli* O157:H7. Antibiotics do not help and may even be harmful. Medicines to stop diarrhea are not recommended. Drink plenty of fluids to replace the fluids being lost because of the diarrhea. Most people recover without specific treatment in five to 10 days.

How can *E. coli* O157:H7 be prevented?

The most important things to remember are that the germs can only make you sick if you swallow them, and that the germs are killed by thoroughly washing your hands with soap and water and by thorough cooking. To prevent *E. coli* you should:

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- Wash your hands before handling food, after using the toilet, and after changing diapers.
- Cook meats (especially ground beef) until there is no pink in the center and the juices run clear. Use a thermometer to make sure the meat has been cooked to a temperature of 160° F.
- Send back undercooked hamburgers when dining out for further cooking.
- Place cooked meats in a clean dish when serving. Cooked meats should not be placed in containers that have held uncooked meats.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables especially those that won't be cooked.
- Avoid unprocessed fruit and vegetable juices.
- Use only pasteurized milk and dairy products.
- Drink water from inspected and safety approved sources or water that has been boiled. Swimming pools should be chlorinated.
- Avoid swallowing lake or pool water while swimming.