

E. coli

What is E. coli?

E. coli are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals. Although most strains are harmless, several are known to produce toxins that can cause diarrhea. One particular *E. coli* strain called O157:H7 can cause severe diarrhea and kidney damage.

What are the symptoms of an E. coli infection?

Some infected people have mild diarrhea or no symptoms at all. Most identified cases develop severe diarrhea and abdominal cramps. Blood is often seen in the stool. Usually little or no fever is present. Symptoms generally appear three to four days after exposure, but can take as long as nine days to appear. Persons experiencing these symptoms should contact their physician.

How is it spread?

E. coli O157:H7 can be acquired by eating contaminated food. The bacteria live in the intestines of some healthy cattle and contamination of the meat may occur in the slaughtering process. Deer meat (venison) may also be infected with the organism. Eating meat that is rare or inadequately cooked is the most common way of getting the infection. Fresh vegetables, unpasteurized fruit juices and raw milk have also caused outbreaks. With careless food handling any food product eaten raw can be contaminated by raw meat juices. Person-to-person transmission, especially in child care settings, can occur if infected people do not wash their hands after using the toilet or diapering children. Drinking contaminated water and swimming in contaminated shallow lakes may also cause infection. Exposures have also occurred from farm animals, particularly calves and cows, and deer jerky which is uncooked dried meat.

How is E. coli O157:H7 infection diagnosed?

Infection with *E. coli* O157:H7 can only be diagnosed by a special stool culture that is not performed in all laboratories. Public health authorities advise doctors and laboratories to consider performing a special stool culture test for *E. coli* O157:H7, particularly in people with bloody or severe diarrhea. Laboratory tests can identify toxic-producing *E. coli*, but a culture should also be done.

What is the treatment?

Symptoms generally go away without antibiotics or other specific treatment in five to ten days. Studies suggest antibiotics are harmful in the treatment of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection. It is recommended that antibiotics and diarrhea medicines not be given.

Where can I get more information?

http://www.cdc.gov/ecoli/qa_ecoli_sickness.htm

