



E. Coli Facts



What is E. coli?

E. coli are bacteria that are commonly found in the intestines of humans and animals. There are different types of e. coli; some are not harmful to people while some cause serious illness such as e. coli 0157:H7.

What causes E. coli infection?

E. coli infections can be spread by foods such as undercooked meats (especially ground beef), unpasteurized apple cider and milk, sandwich meats, raw vegetables, cheese and contaminated water. Once someone has eaten contaminated food or water, this infection can be passed from person to person by hand to mouth contact. E. coli does not survive in the air, and is not spread by coughing, kissing or normal, everyday interactions with others. Poor hand washing and improper food handling can lead to the spread of this illness.

What are the symptoms of E. coli infection?

Symptoms of E. coli infection appear within hours or up to ten days after eating contaminated food or water. Symptoms are: stomach cramps, diarrhea (may be bloody), nausea and vomiting, and sometimes a fever. Less than 10% of people with e. coli infection will develop Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS). HUS is a serious complication of e. coli infection that may lead to kidney failure. Symptoms of HUS may include peeing less than usual, swelling in the face, hands, and feet, paleness of the skin, irritability and tiredness. Young children (especially under five years of age) and the elderly are most at risk for HUS. It is important to watch for the signs of HUS even after diarrhea has stopped. Anyone with these symptoms should see their health care provider immediately.

Who is most at risk for E. coli infection?

Anyone can be infected with e. coli but the very young and the very old are more at risk for complications.

How is E. coli infection treated?

Generally, an e. coli infection will go away on its own in seven to ten days. Antibiotics and medications to stop diarrhea are not recommended and may increase the risk of complications. It is important for anyone with diarrhea or vomiting to drink lots of fluids.

How can I reduce the risk of E. coli infections?

Cook ground beef thoroughly to an internal temperature of 71°C or until the juices run clear and the meat is no longer pink.

Drink only pasteurized apple cider and milk. Never drink milk directly from the animal.

Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.

Thorough hand washing is important. Make sure hands are washed with soap and water after using the toilet, handling diapers, pets, livestock and before preparing food.

Clean and sanitize counter tops and utensils after these have been in contact with raw meats and poultry.

Use separate work surfaces and utensils for preparing raw and cooked foods.

Keep cold foods at 4°C or lower. Keep hot foods at 70°C or higher.

Drink water from a safe, properly treated water supply. Do not drink water from open streams and lakes.

If you have diarrhea, avoid preparing or handling food that others will be eating. If you work as a food handler or a health care worker, report any symptoms to your manager.

Adapted from: Canadian Food Inspection Agency

