



Communicable Diseases

Escherichia coli



What is Escherichia coli?

Escherichia coli or *E. coli* is a bacteria commonly found 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.

Who can get an E. coli infection?

Anyone can become infected with *E. coli* but young children, the elderly, pregnant women and those with ill health are more likely to develop serious complications.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms generally appear three to four days after exposure, but can take as long as ten days to appear. Symptoms include severe abdominal cramps, watery diarrhea, bloody diarrhea. Usually little or no fever is present.

Quick Facts:

- *E. coli* O157:H7 can cause bloody diarrhea or kidney damage
- Associated with raw meats, raw milk or non-chlorinated water
- Good personal hygiene is the best prevention.

How is it spread?

E. coli O157:H7 can be acquired by eating contaminated foods. Cattle and deer meat contaminated during the slaughtering process can cause illness if these meats are undercooked prior to being eaten. Drinking unpasteurized milk, fruit juices or ciders have been known to cause outbreaks. Drinking contaminated water or swimming in contaminated shallow lakes may cause infection. People have also been infected by consuming raw produce contaminated by manure in the field or by raw meat product in the kitchen. Person to person or person to object transmission can occur if infected people do not wash their hands after using the toilet.

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 unless advised by your doctor.

Are there complications?

Dehydration may occur if diarrhea fluid loss exceeds fluid intake. The most serious complication, particularly in children under five years, is a condition called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). This syndrome destroys red blood cells, lowers platelet levels and results in kidney failure. Hospital treatment is required including transfusions and dialysis. Death occurs in a small percentage of cases.

What can I do to prevent infection?

- Cook ground beef and hamburger thoroughly.
- Keep raw meat separate from ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash hands, counters, and utensils with hot soapy water after they touch raw meat.
- Never place cooked hamburgers, ground beef, or other ready-to-eat food on unwashed plates that held raw patties.
- Wash fruit and vegetables thoroughly under running water, especially if they will not be cooked.
- Wash hands thoroughly using soap and warm water after handling raw meat, using the bathroom, helping a child in the bathroom, or changing diapers.
- Wash hands thoroughly using soap and warm water before preparing or eating food.
- Teach children how and when to wash their hands.

- Drink only pasteurized milk, juice and cider.
- Anyone with a diarrheal illness should avoid swimming in public pools or lakes, sharing baths with others, and preparing food for others.

If you have diarrhea or a possible food borne illness:

- See your family doctor.
- Drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration.
- If you work as a food handler, in health care or in a daycare **refrain from working while symptomatic.**

For more information contact your doctor, Public Health Inspector or Public Health Services:

Moose Jaw office - (306) 691-1500
Central Butte office - (306) 796-2130
Assiniboia office - (306) 642-2200
Gravelbourg office - (306) 648-1400
Health Line - 1-877-800-0002