

E Coli 0157: important information

What is E Coli 0157?

Escherichia coli is a family of germs (bacteria) present in the gut of animals (especially cattle), which can be passed to humans. The type called *E coli O157*, is rare but can cause infection which can sometimes lead to very serious illness and sometimes death, especially in very young children and the elderly. Most people will recover fully without any lasting damage.

It is most seen in the rural areas of Scotland such as the Borders usually in the summer and early autumn.

What are the symptoms?

The incubation period, which is the time between swallowing the bacteria until the first symptoms appear, is usually 1 to 9 days but can be longer. It can take up to 3 weeks to clear from the body.

People react to the infection in very different ways. Some may not get ill at all. Symptoms include:

- ❖ Diarrhoea (eventually bloody)
- ❖ Severe abdominal (tummy) pain
- ❖ Feeling sick (nausea) and vomiting
- ❖ Fever (uncommon)
- ❖ Headache

A small number of people 5 –10 days after first getting ill go on to develop very serious problems such as kidney damage and blood clotting problems. Hospital treatment in these cases is needed.

How does it spread?

- ❖ The commonest method of spread is by eating contaminated food especially undercooked meats or poultry particularly beef burgers or sausages
- ❖ By drinking raw milk
- ❖ Drinking contaminated water from private water supplies or streams
- ❖ Swallowing contaminated water during watersports: swimming, canoeing etc.
- ❖ Not washing hands properly after direct contact with pets and farm animals. Young animals can carry large numbers of the bacteria
- ❖ Contamination from shoes/boots being transferred to hands and then mouth (particularly in children & smokers)
- ❖ Person to person. This is seen more within families and sexual partners. Outbreaks are sometimes seen in institutions such as nurseries

Can it be prevented?

The risk of spreading E Coli will be reduced if you practice the following:

1. Wash carefully all of the hands

after

- ❖ handling animals
- ❖ changing nappies
- ❖ visiting the toilet

and before

- ❖ cooking
- ❖ handling food
- ❖ feeding the young or elderly
- ❖ eating

2. Prepare food safely

- ❖ Clean food preparation surfaces with detergent and warm water
- ❖ Do not use the same chopping board/knife for raw meat or other foodstuffs without washing thoroughly
- ❖ Defrost poultry, meat and other meat products well before cooking
- ❖ Follow manufacturers instructions
- ❖ Remember cooked meat is stored at the top of the fridge and uncooked meat at the bottom
- ❖ Eat cooked food immediately or cool quickly and place in fridge or freezer
- ❖ Run the fridge at 5°C or below
- ❖ Re-heated foods should be piping hot
- ❖ Try to keep pets out of the kitchen
- ❖ Lastly, thoroughly wash all salad vegetables

3. Thoroughly cook food

E coli is destroyed by heat. Ensure all meat (especially poultry) is thoroughly cooked. Cook until the juices run clear and there are no pink bits inside

4. Care in leisure and play activities

- ❖ Wash hands properly and wear protective clothing and boots when visiting a farm
- ❖ Children should not use a swimming pool with an upset stomach or diarrhoea

Will I need treatment?

Generally antibiotics are not very effective and are not given as they can make the disease worse. Care is needed to drink plenty water or other clear fluids.

The GP should be contacted if symptoms become severe.

You will be advised about when it is safe to return to work or nursery/school. Sometimes stool specimens are needed to check to see if the infection has cleared.

Is there anything else?

This nasty infection can only be controlled if we better understand how it was passed on. This may help to stop others getting infected. Your help with this is important.

A nurse or doctor from the Public Health Department or an Environmental Health Officer will be in touch to find out more information about the time leading up to the illness. They will want to know about who else may be at risk.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

This document is available on request in different languages, audio tape, Braille format, large print or BSL DVD. Please contact:

NHS Borders on 01896 825522 or email equality@borders.scot.nhs.uk

Produced by: Public Health Dept, NHS Borders, Education Centre, Borders General Hospital, Melrose, TD6 9BD, 01896 825560

June 2014