



## ESCHERICHIA COLI ENTERITIS (E. COLI)

### WHAT IS E. COLI?

*E. coli* (diarrhea illness) is an infectious disease caused by a group of bacteria called *Escherichia coli* enteritis. These bacteria are found worldwide and in New Brunswick. They live in the intestines of infected people and animals and are passed in the feces. Illness caused by *E. coli* 0157:H7 is also called “hamburger disease” as this bacteria strain lives only in cattle and may be found in ground beef.

### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF E. COLI?

Symptoms usually appear three to four days after a person is infected by the bacteria. Some people may not have any symptoms of the disease. Most persons who become ill have frequent diarrhea and stomach cramps. The diarrhea is often bloody. Symptoms usually last for five to ten days. Young children, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems are at greater risk for more serious disease. In a few cases, the strain *E. coli* 0157:H7 can cause a serious, sometimes fatal illness (hemolytic uremic syndrome).

### HOW IS E. COLI SPREAD?

*E. coli* bacteria live in the intestines of infected persons and animals (particularly cattle and poultry) and are found in feces. The bacteria may be found in soil, food, water, or surfaces that have been contaminated. The disease is spread by eating food contaminated with the bacteria or by putting a contaminated object in one’s mouth. For example, water can be contaminated from sewage or animal feces. Meat can be contaminated with feces during the slaughter process. Food and surfaces can be contaminated by contact with infected feces from people’s hands.

Most cases of *E. coli* are associated with improperly handling raw meat or eating raw or undercooked meat or poultry. Contaminated meat looks and smells normal. The bacteria can be found in raw ground beef and can be spread to other foods by cutting raw ground beef on a cutting board, and then using the unwashed cutting board or utensil to prepare other foods. Drinking unpasteurized milk or contaminated water can also spread the disease.

### WHO CAN GET E. COLI?

Anyone who swallows the bacteria can become infected.

### CAN E. COLI BE TREATED?

Persons with diarrhea should drink lots of liquids to avoid dehydration. Consult your family doctor for advice and treatment if you have bloody or severe diarrhea. *E. coli* is diagnosed by a laboratory test.

### HOW CAN E. COLI BE PREVENTED?

**Practice good personal hygiene.** Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet, after handling animals, after handling raw meats, and before handling or eating food.

**Practice basic food safety precautions.** Wash and/or peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating. Thoroughly cook all meats (meat, poultry and seafood). Prevent contact of cooked foods with raw meats or poultry. Drink and eat only pasteurized dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt).

**Avoid water that might be contaminated.** Do not drink untreated surface water. Avoid swallowing water when swimming or bathing.

For additional information, contact your regional Public Health office or your family doctor.

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