
DISEASES : E. coli Bacteria

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

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 not harmful to people and some which cause serious illness such as E. coli O157: H7.

How can you get sick from the harmful type of E. coli ?

- E. coli infections can be spread by many food sources such as undercooked ground beef, unpasteurized apple cider and milk, ham, turkey, roast beef, sandwich meats, raw vegetables, cheese and contaminated water.
- Once someone has consumed 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, on surfaces like tables or counters and is not spread by coughing, kissing or normal, everyday interactions with friends and neighbours.
- Poor hand washing and improper food handling are factors that lead to the spread of this illness.

How do you prevent 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 let youngsters sample milk produced directly from the animal.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Thorough hand washing is always a good practice. Make sure hands are washed with soap and water after using the toilet, handling diapers, pets, livestock or 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 supply intended for human consumption.
- Do not drink water from open streams and lakes.
- If ill with diarrhea, avoid preparing or handling food that others will be eating. If employed as a food handler or a health care worker, report any symptoms to your manager.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the symptoms of infection ?

Stomach cramps, diarrhea (possibly bloody), fever (infrequent), nausea, vomiting. If you or a family member have any of the symptoms, it is important to wash your hands, after going to the bathroom, and before preparing food for others. If possible, have someone who has not been infected prepare the meals.

Can I get it from shaking hands with, or by kissing an infected person ?

E. Coli is not spread by coughing, kissing, or through normal, everyday interactions with friends or neighbours. However, once someone has consumed contaminated food or water, this infection can be passed from person to person by hand to mouth contact. Poor hand washing and improper food handling are factors that lead to the spread of this illness.

What should I do if symptoms persist ?

Anyone who shows symptoms of E. coli should see their physician immediately.

Under 10% of individuals 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 a decrease in the amount of urine produced, swelling in the face, hands, and feet, paleness of the skin, irritability and fatigue. Young children (especially under 5 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 physician immediately.

What is the treatment ?

Generally, an E. coli infection must run its course. Antibiotics and antimotility medications are not recommended and may increase the risk of complications.

Who can tell me more about E. coli Bacteria ?

Contact your local public health unit for more information.

Government of Ontario

For information about health services and resources :

www.health.gov.on.ca

For consumer-friendly health tips and information :

www.HealthyOntario.com

INFOline: 1-877-234-4343;

TTY: 1-800-387-5559

Telehealth Ontario:

1-866-797-0000; TTY 1-866-797-0007

INFOline is open during business hours and can provide general information on healthcare.

Telehealth Ontario is a 24/7 service which uses nurse practitioners to answer your immediate health concerns.