

E. coli O157

Factsheet

Advice for people at home and in other environments where someone has *E. coli* O157 infection

What is *E. coli* O157 and what are the symptoms?

E. coli O157 (also known as VTEC) is a type of bacteria called *Escherichia coli*, of which O157 is the most common in the UK. It can cause a range of symptoms, from mild diarrhoea to severe abdominal pain and bloody diarrhoea.

In a small proportion of patients (2-7%, and mainly children), it can cause haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS), which is a serious condition resulting in kidney failure.

After being infected by the *E. coli* bacteria it usually takes three to four days before symptoms develop, but it can be between one and 14 days.

Symptoms can last up to two weeks, but severe complications such as HUS can last longer. Most people rid themselves of the bacteria after about a week, although some people, particularly children, may carry *E. coli* O157 for several months after they have got better.

How could I catch *E. coli* O157?

E. coli O157 is found in the gut of many animals, mainly cattle, but also in the faeces of other animals

You can catch it by:

- Eating contaminated food (such as undercooked meat).
- Contact with infected animals, either directly by touching, or through accidental contact with animal faeces.
- Contact with people who have the illness (through not washing hands thoroughly after using the toilet and/or before handling food – particularly at home, in nurseries and infant schools).
- Drinking water from inadequately treated water supplies.
- Swimming or playing in contaminated water, such as ponds or streams.

If I have had *E. coli* O157 infection or I live with a person who has it do I need to stay off work or school?

Anyone who has had an *E. coli* O157 infection should stay away from work or school until they have been completely free of symptoms for 48 hours. Also, groups whose

- Work involves handling food or
- Work in health or social care

should discuss their situation with their local authority environmental health officers, who can advise further, as tests may be required to confirm when it is safe to return to work.

If you have not had *E. coli*, but live in the same household with someone who has and you work in one of the two categories above you should also seek advice from your local authority environmental health officer.

Children under five years of age who have had *E. coli* or live with someone who has had *E. coli* and who attend pre-school groups or nurseries. Parents should discuss their situation with their health professional before the child returns to school or nursery, as tests may be required to confirm it is safe to return.

How can I prevent other people becoming infected?

Because only a few bacteria are needed to cause illness people with *E. coli* O157 are very infectious. The infection can be spread easily within families or in environments where there are young children, in health care settings or food preparation areas. Young children are particularly likely to be infected, as they frequently put objects and hands in their mouths.

How can I prevent *E. coli* O157 from spreading at home?

- It is most important to wash your hands thoroughly with soap in running water and to dry them completely. In general, liquid soap and warm water are better.
- Everyone must wash their hands after contact with an infected person, particularly after handling their clothes or bedding.
- Always wash hands after going to the toilet, changing babies' nappies, before preparing or serving food, or eating meals.
- Do not share towels and nappy changing mats.
- Always use a flush toilet, where possible.
- Wash soiled clothing and bed linen separately from other clothes in a domestic washing machine at the highest temperature possible (e.g. 60°C). Wipe down the outside of the washing machine with hot water and detergent after any heavily soiled load. After handling soiled bedclothes or clothing, wash your hands thoroughly.

Cleaning

- Clean toilet seats, toilet flush handles, basin taps, surfaces and toilet door handles at least daily, preferably more often, using hot water and detergent. Disinfection sprays/wipes or alcohol-based wipes may be used on toilet seats and other surfaces, but only after any visible soiling has been removed.
- Thick household bleach is highly effective. Dilute one part bleach to every 10 parts water for soiled surfaces and one part bleach to every 100 parts water for other hard surfaces. Ideally, use heavy-duty domestic rubber gloves (or a synthetic equivalent) and disposable cloths for cleaning.
- Dispose of cloths by placing them in a plastic bag, sealing the neck and placing in household waste. Thoroughly wash rubber gloves in hot water and detergent after use, then rinse and allow to dry. Do not clean soiled items in the kitchen.
- Deal with any spillage of faeces immediately. Clean the soiled area with hot water and detergent using heavy-duty domestic rubber gloves (or synthetic equivalent). Clean gloves (as above) and wash hands thoroughly.

NOTE: Swimming/paddling pools

Children under five years of age with *E. coli* O157 infection should not swim in public swimming pools, or share paddling pools with others, until they have had test results showing that they are no longer an infection risk to others.

Who do I contact if I think I have *E. coli* O157 infection?

People who suspect they or their children have *E. coli* O157 infection should contact their GP or out-of-hours service, as soon as possible.

Where can I get more information about *E. coli* O157?

Further information is available on the Health Protection Agency website at: www.hpa.org.uk.