

Escherichia

Department of Human Services, Division of Disease Control 207-287-5301

E. Coli 0157:H7 is a bacteria that can cause bloody diarrhea. It frequently occurs in the summer, but can occur at any time of year. The term “0157:H7” indicates a particular type of E. Coli bacteria.

Anyone can become ill after ingesting this type of bacteria.

E. Coli 0157:H7 bacteria can be found in people and in cows. The bacteria are spread by eating or drinking food or water that is contaminated by the feces (stool) of infected people or cattle. Infected animals may contaminate meat products, water supplies, milk and other foods. Inadequately cooked ground beef and raw (unpasteurized) milk have been responsible for illness in the past.

The major symptom is diarrhea which may range from mild and non-bloody to stools which appear to be bloody water. Stomach cramps and chills may occur but fever is not usually present.

While the symptoms may appear from 3 and 8 days after infection, most often they appear within 3 to 4 days.

Rarely, the infection can cause a condition called Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS) which causes the kidneys to stop functioning. This complication occurs primarily in children under the age of 5 years.

An infected person with diarrhea can spread the bacteria to others for as long as the diarrhea lasts. The organism is present in the stool of infected adults typically less than a week; for a proportion of infected children, it may be present for up to three weeks.

Most people get better on their own. Persons with diarrhea should drink plenty of liquids. Antibiotics may be used to treat severe cases.

Since the bacteria is passed in feces, people with diarrhea (especially children in day care, health care workers, or people who handle food) should not go to work or school. After diarrhea ends, persons may return to work or school but they should carefully wash their hands after using the toilet.

General guidelines:

1. Always refrigerate meat products. Never leave meat at room temperature.

2. Always cook meat completely, never eat raw meat.
3. Avoid drinking raw (unpasteurized) milk.
4. Carefully wash hands before and after preparing food. Clean surfaces and utensils after contact with raw meat before using them for other foods.
5. Always wash hands carefully with soap and warm water after using the toilet or changing diapers. Make sure that children wash their hands carefully after using the toilet.

Nancy Dube, School Nurse Consultant
Department of Education
624-6688, Nancy.Dube@Maine.Gov