



Frequently asked questions about E. Coli

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Background:

For decades, meat, especially ground beef, was the major culprit when we thought about E. coli. But three major national outbreaks of the deadly O157:H7 strain of E. coli in spinach and lettuce in 2006 brought E. coli roaring back into the news. But now when we think E.coli we also think vegetables.

What is E. coli?

E. coli is a common kind of bacteria that lives in the intestines of animals and people. There are many kinds of E. coli. Most are harmless. However, one dangerous strain is called E. coli O157:H7. It produces a powerful poison. You can become very sick if it gets into your food or water.

How is E. coli spread?

Outbreaks often are caused by food that has gotten the bacteria, E coli, in it. Bacteria can get accidentally mixed into ground beef before packaging. Eating undercooked meat can spread the bacteria, even though the meat looks and smells normal. E. coli can also live on cows' udders. It may get into milk that is not pasteurized.

Raw vegetables, sprouts, and fruits that have been grown or washed in dirty water can carry E. coli. It can get into drinking water, lakes, or swimming pools that have sewage in them. It is also spread by people who have not washed their hands after going to the toilet.

E. coli can be spread to playmates by toddlers who are not toilet trained or by adults who do not wash their hands carefully after changing diapers. Children can pass the bacteria in their stool to another person for 2 weeks after they have gotten well from an E. coli illness. Older children and adults rarely carry the bacteria without symptoms.

What are the signs of E. coli sickness?

Bloody diarrhea and stomach pain are the most common signs of E. coli sickness. People usually do not have a fever, or may have only a slight fever.

Some people, especially children under 5 and the elderly, can become very sick from E. coli. The infection damages their red blood cells and their kidneys. This only happens to about 1 out of 50 people, but it is very serious. Without hospital care, they can die. See a doctor right away if you think you may have gotten sick from E. coli.

How will my doctor know if E. coli made me sick?

Your doctor will test to see if your sickness was caused by E. coli by sending a stool sample to a lab. The lab will test for the bacteria.

Anyone who suddenly has diarrhea with blood in it should call or see a doctor.

How is E Coli treated?

Your doctor will tell you what is best. Taking medicine on your own may not help you get better, and it could make things worse. Do not take antibiotics or diarrhea medicine like Imodium® unless your doctor tells you to.

Will E. coli infection cause problems for me later?

People who have only diarrhea and stomach ache usually get completely well in 5-10 days. They do not have problems later.

For those people who get very sick and have kidney failure, about 1 out of 3 may have kidney problems later. In rare cases, people have other problems like high blood pressure, blindness, or are paralyzed. Talk to your doctor if you have questions about this.

What is being done to keep food safe from E. coli?

New laws have helped keep food from being contaminated with E. coli. They keep meat safer during slaughter and grinding, and vegetables safer when they are grown, picked, and washed. But there is still a chance that E. coli could reach your food, so you should take the precautions listed below.

Prevention – the best medicine!

What can I do to stay safe from E. coli?

- Cook all ground beef thoroughly. During an outbreak of E. coli, vegetables should be boiled for at least 1 minute before serving.
- Cook ground beef to 160° F Test the meat by putting a food thermometer in the thickest part of the meat. Do not eat ground beef that is still pink in the middle.
- If a restaurant serves you an under-cooked hamburger, send it back for more cooking. Ask for a new bun and a clean plate, too.
- Don't spread bacteria in your kitchen. Keep raw meat away from other foods. Wash your hands, cutting board, counter, dishes, and knives and forks with hot soapy water after they touch raw meat, spinach, greens, or sprouts.
- Never put cooked hamburgers or meat on the plate they were on before cooking. Wash the meat thermometer after use.
- Drink only pasteurized milk, juice, or cider. Frozen juice or juice sold in boxes and glass jars at room temperature has been pasteurized, although it may not say so on the label.
- Drink water from safe sources like municipal water that has been treated with chlorine, wells that have been tested or bottled water.
- Do not swallow lake or pool water while you are swimming.
- During an outbreak: Carefully follow instructions provided by public health officials on what foods to avoid in order to protect yourself and your family from infection.

For More information about E. Coli and other health issues, visit us on the web at:

www.bhsj.org