

E. COLI

(Escherichia coli)

What is it?

E. Coli is a bacteria that normally lives in the intestines of humans and animals, especially cattle. Most strains of this bacteria are harmless. One particular E. coli strain called O157:H7 can cause severe diarrhea and kidney damage to some people, particularly children under 5 years of age and the elderly. This complication is called hemolytic uremic syndrome, in which the red blood cells are destroyed and the kidneys fail.

E. coli is commonly found in undercooked or raw hamburger and that is why E. coli is also known as "Hamburger Disease". It can also be found in poultry, pork, raw milk and unpasteurized apple cider.

How does it spread?

People become ill after ingesting food or drinking water contaminated by the bacteria. It can also be spread from person to person through the hands of an infected person who did not wash their hands after using the toilet.

Signs and symptoms of illness:

People infected by E. coli O157:H7 can develop a range of symptoms, from mild diarrhea to severe bloody diarrhea. Abdominal cramps are common with little or no fever. Occasional vomiting occurs. Some people show no symptoms at all.

Who is at risk?

Everyone. The young and very old are more susceptible. It can lead to haemorrhagic colitis or haemolytic uremic syndrome (kidney failure).

How long before illness starts?

It lasts longer in children than in adults; 7 to 11 days in children; 5 to 7 days in adults.

Prevention:

- Wash hands after using the toilet and before preparing foods;
- Clean and sanitize counter tops and utensils after contact with raw meats and poultry, especially before using these areas for preparing ready-to-eat foods;
- Cook meat and poultry to a minimum internal temperature of 74°C (165°F);
- Keep hot foods hot (60°C, 140°F) before serving and cold foods cold (4°C, 40°F, or colder);
- Drink only pasteurized milk. Drink water from a safe water supply; and
- Avoid preparing or handling any food if ill with diarrhea.

For more information on common foodborne illness or to speak with a Public Health Inspector, call the Peterborough County-City Health Unit at 705-743-1000.