

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

E. coli
0157:H7

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 150 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111

What is *E. coli* 0157:H7?

E. coli are germs (bacteria) that normally live in the intestines of people and animals. Most strains of this germ are harmless, but the strain called *E. coli* 0157:H7 makes a toxin that can make people sick.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are severe stomach cramps and diarrhea. Some people vomit or run a fever, but these are less common. Sometimes the diarrhea turns bloody after 2 or 3 days. These symptoms usually go away by themselves after 6 to 8 days. In a small number of people, this strain of *E. coli* can cause a rare but serious problem called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS).

What is HUS?

HUS is a disease that affects the kidneys and the blood clotting system. It starts about a week after the diarrhea begins and affects more children than adults. In bad cases, dialysis is used for a while to do the kidneys' work. Some people also develop a bleeding problem or low blood count (anemia). Most people who get HUS will regain their health with no blood or kidney problems.

Where is *E. coli* 0157:H7 found?

It lives in the intestines of healthy cattle and can get into the meat when cattle are slaughtered. The germs are killed when the meat is thoroughly cooked. The most common food source is ground beef (hamburg), because the grinding spreads the germs throughout the meat. These germs have also been found in raw milk, roast beef, and apple cider.

How is it spread?

E. coli 0157:H7 must be swallowed to cause an infection. This can happen if you eat or drink something that is tainted by these germs and not properly cooked or pasteurized. The germs can be spread from person to person if someone who is infected does not thoroughly wash his or her hands with soap and water before preparing food for others. Spreading *E. coli* germs this way is more common in families and day care centers than in schools and restaurants.

How is *E. coli* 0157:H7 diagnosed?

Infection with this germ can only be diagnosed by testing a stool sample. It is not a routine test, so if your doctor or nurse thinks you might have *E. coli* 0157:H7, she or he must ask the lab to test for it.

How is it treated?

There is no treatment for *E. coli* 0157:H7. Antibiotics do not help and may even be harmful. Do not try to control the diarrhea, which should go away by itself after a few days. Just drink plenty of liquids to replace the fluids being lost. For severe cases of HUS, dialysis or transfusions are sometimes used until the patient's kidneys and blood return to normal.

How can you prevent it?

Do not eat undercooked or rare ground beef, raw milk, unpasteurized dairy products, or cider made from unwashed apples. Always cook meat until the center is brown, not pink. Cook hamburgers until the center is 155°F. Do not put cooked meat on a dish or cutting board that held raw meat. Always wash your hands with soap and water after going to the bathroom or changing a diaper. Wash them again before touching or eating food.

Where can you find out more?

Your doctor, nurse or clinic

Your local board of health

In the phone book under local government

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Bureau of Communicable Disease Control
Division of Epidemiology
(617) 522-3700, x420

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