

# *E. Coli*

## Frequently Asked Questions



### What is *E. Coli*?

*Escherichia coli* (*E. Coli*) is a large group of bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals. Most strains of *E. Coli* are harmless. However, some strains produce toxins such as shiga-toxin, which can cause illness. *E. Coli* 0157:H7 is a shiga-toxin producing strain known to cause more severe illness.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of *E. Coli* infection begin 3-4 days after exposure (range: 1-10 days) and can last about 5-7 days. Symptoms include:

- Diarrhea (often bloody)
- Stomach cramps/pain
- Fever (low-grade)
- Nausea
- Vomiting

A small number of people with *E. Coli* (5-10%) will develop hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). The symptoms of HUS include decreased frequency of urination, feeling tired, and losing color in the cheeks and inside of eyelids. HUS usually occurs around 7 days after the first symptoms, usually when the diarrhea starts to improve. People with HUS should seek medical care and will often become hospitalized to prevent kidney failure.

### How does it spread?

*E. Coli* is usually spread by consuming food or drinks that contain the bacteria. Certain foods such as unpasteurized or raw milk or cheeses, unpasteurized apple cider, undercooked meat, and some vegetables are more likely to spread the germ. The germ can also be spread after contact with a sick person who does not wash their hands or after contact with animals on a farm or petting zoo. Sick persons usually stop spreading the germ after they begin to feel better. However, some persons can continue to spread the germ for weeks or even months.

### How is it diagnosed and treated?

A stool sample will be collected to determine the diagnosis. Supportive therapy, such as rehydration is important. Antibiotics and anti-diarrheals are not helpful in treating *E. Coli* or its symptoms, because they increase the risk of HUS.

### What should I do if I think I have it?

If you think you have *E. Coli*, you should contact your doctor and discuss your symptoms.

### How is it prevented?

- Be sure to wash hands frequently with soap and water especially before and after food preparation, after changing diapers or going to the bathroom, and after touching or petting animals (especially those at farms, fairs, and petting zoos).
- Avoid raw or undercooked poultry, meat, eggs and milk, consuming untreated water or recreational water, and thoroughly wash all raw vegetables.
- When preparing raw poultry or meat, disinfect any surfaces that come in contact with raw food, including cutting boards and utensils.
- If you are sick, do not swim until 2 weeks after the diarrhea has stopped.

For more information contact your doctor, refer to <http://www.phila.gov/Health/> or contact the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, Division of Disease Control at 215-685-6740.

