

## If you or a member of your household has E.coli O157:

Ensure you and all household members wash their hands thoroughly with warm water and soap;

- After using or cleaning the toilet
- After attending to another person who has diarrhoea / vomiting
- After changing a baby's nappy
- After handling or washing soiled clothes and bedding
- Before eating or preparing food

Ensure each person affected has their own towel for drying hands.

Ensure young children are supervised when washing hands, or have their hands washed for them.

Wash soiled clothes, bedding and towels on a hot cycle of the washing machine. Keep soiled washing separate from the rest of the washing.

Clean toilet seats, flush handles and taps frequently with hot soapy water. The toilet bowl should be cleaned with a toilet brush and disinfectant. Wear rubber gloves to clean the toilet and keep them for this use only.

Where possible stay away from other people until your symptoms have stopped, especially vulnerable people like the elderly and very young. Where possible, do not prepare food for your family or anyone else.

**NB: If you are using a disinfectant, ensure that it conforms to a British Standard and follow the manufacturer's instructions. Keep all chemical cleaning agents in a safe place away from children.**

For further advice or information contact:  
*Health Protection Agency  
South West Peninsula HPU, Devon Team  
tel: 01803 861833, or  
the Environmental Health Department of your local council*

The Health Protection Agency is an independent organisation dedicated to protecting people's health. It brings together the expertise formerly in a number of official organisations.

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# HPA South West Peninsula



## E.coli O157

INFORMATION LEAFLET



## What is *E. coli* O157?

*E. coli* are bacteria (germs) that we all carry in our gut, usually without any harm whatever. However a few strains including *E. coli* O157, can produce toxins (poisons) that can lead to serious illness.

The main source of *E. coli* O157 are animals (particularly cattle), and the bacteria can spread to humans via contaminated meat, and less frequently, dairy products.

This particular strain of *E. coli* can cause diarrhoea ranging from mild diarrhoea of short duration to severe bloody diarrhoea with fever, abdominal pain and lack of energy. Severe complications can include anaemia and kidney problems which may require hospital treatment.

The incubation period (time taken from swallowing the bacteria until illness starts) is usually 3 – 4 days but can be 2 – 10 days.

The infectious period (the period when the infection can be passed from person to person) for *E. coli* O157 is not clear, but it is known to be longer in young children (at least 3 weeks).

## Who can it affect?

**ANYONE** – but it is most common in children under 5 years old and they are at greatest risk of developing kidney problems. The elderly are also at particular risk of serious infection.

## How is *E. coli* O157 caught?

By eating raw and undercooked food (particularly beef, minced beef and venison), or by eating foods that have been in contact with these.

By eating foods that have been contaminated with animal faeces (particularly farm animals) eg unwashed vegetables.

By drinking un-pasteurised contaminated milk. Also drinking untreated water.

By not washing hands after touching infected animals (particularly farm animals). This can be a particular problem when children have direct contact with farm animals eg at farm visitor centres.

Person to person spread can occur particularly in families, nurseries or day care centres. This happens by swallowing *E. coli* O157 germs which have been passed from the bowel of the person who is carrying *E. coli* O157. It can be passed on unwashed hands and by touching surfaces they have contaminated such as toilet flush handles, door handles, taps, etc.

## Do you need to stay off work or school?

**YES** - until you have been completely free from any symptoms for **48 hours**.

Children should **not** play with other children or attend school until they are fully recovered and have been symptom free for **48 hours**.

Young children (pre-school and infants), and people in certain high-risk occupations such as food-handlers, health care workers and persons who are unable to be responsible for their own hand hygiene, should **not** return until they have been given clearance to do so by the Environmental Health Officer. The Environmental Health Officer may require the affected child/person to provide specimens to ensure that the infection has completely cleared.

## How do you avoid catching it?

- By thoroughly cooking all foods, especially meat, until piping hot. Take extra care with burgers and sausages that the juices run clear. Always check BBQ meat!
- Keep raw meat away from cooked foods and other ready to eat foods (foods that won't be cooked) eg salad, bread, cheese.
- Wash fruit and vegetables well, especially if to be eaten raw.
- Clean work surfaces, dishes and utensils thoroughly in hot water and detergent after they have been used with raw meat.
- Only drink pasteurised milk and avoid drinking untreated water.
- Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water and dry with a clean towel:
  - after going to the toilet
  - after changing a baby's nappy
  - after contact with pets and animals
  - before preparing and eating food
  - after handling raw food
- If on picnics with no water available to wash hands, use disposable hand wipes.
- If on the beach, do not wash hands in beach streams; these could be heavily contaminated.
- Keep pets away from food, dishes and worktops.
- **Take precautions during farm visits by children**, particularly:
  - Handwashing after touching animals and before eating
  - Avoiding eating and drinking whilst visiting animals
  - Keeping their faces away from animals
  - Not touching animal droppings
  - Cleaning shoes and washing clothes after visit if soiled