

E. coli 0157

Frequently Asked Questions



Q: *What is E. coli 0157?*

A: This strain of E. coli is actually just normal intestinal bacteria for cows, sheep and goats; no illness occurs in these animals. O157 carries a toxin (a poison) for humans, that can injure the intestines, and cause irritation to human blood vessels once absorbed into the bloodstream from the intestines.

Q: *How do you get exposed to E. coli?*

A: Humans come in contact with O157 by contact with the animals directly or indirectly by exposure to their poop (can be in raw hamburger or on vegetables, fruits or unpasteurized juices where the vegetables and fruits come in contact with the poop).

Q: *What are the symptoms?*

A: Most who come in contact with O157 will have no symptoms or minimal symptoms. The body knows that O157 is not a normal human resident of the intestines and will get rid of it. People who ingest just a few bacteria will have virtually no symptoms. Those who ingest more bacteria may get some mild to moderate diarrhea (can have bits of blood present) from irritation to the intestines, but can usually keep drinking and actually feel reasonably well. For those who ingest a lot of bacteria, the diarrhea may be severe, bloody, and associated with vomiting. These kids may get hospitalized if they cannot take enough fluids, or appear sick. Antibiotics may make the diarrhea WORSE, as it will kill the bacteria and release the toxins all at once.

Q: *Can there be serious complications?*

A: Rarely, some children who absorb a lot of toxin into the blood stream (many of whom get over their diarrhea), will have tiny filters in the kidneys (the bloodstream is continuously filtered by the kidneys) that become plugged up, a slow process that usually takes several days to occur. The children who have kidney injury will pee a bit less each day, despite drinking normal amounts, and will begin to get 'puffy' particularly noticeable in the face, hands and feet. These kids need to come into the hospital to manage the build-up of all the products in the bloodstream that are usually filtered and eliminated by the kidney to keep the blood healthy. Most of these kids will have a full recovery over several weeks.

Q: *How can I find out if my child has E. coli 0157?*

A: The stool can be tested by your healthcare provider for the presence of the toxin associated with O157; many labs run these tests, with results back within just one or two days. If *any test is positive for O157*, our San Diego Public Health authorities are IMMEDIATELY notified.

Q: *What are the best ways to prevent infection?*

A: Wash hands after contact with animals. Wash fruits and vegetables before eating. Cook hamburgers until the middle of the hamburger is no longer pink and juices run clear. Pasteurized juices are less likely to have O157 than juices that are not heated for sterilization.

More questions? Please contact your primary care provider or follow this link: <https://www.cdc.gov/ecoli>