



# Escherichia coli (*E. coli*)

## What is it?

*E. coli* are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals. Although most strains are harmless, several are known to produce toxins that can cause diarrhoea. One particular *E. coli* strain called O157:H7 can cause severe diarrhea and kidney damage.

## Where is it found?

- Cattle are considered to be the main source of Enterohaemorrhagic Escherichia coli (EHEC).
- Faecal contamination of the environment by cattle and other warm-blooded animals provides a continuing source of EHEC to a wide variety of raw foods.
- EHEC has been detected in beef, salami, alfalfa sprouts, lettuce, unpasteurised milk, apple juice and apple cider.

## Why is it a problem?

- EHEC is capable of causing the human illness known as haemorrhagic colitis, a disease characterised by nausea, severe abdominal cramps, watery or very bloody diarrhoea and tiredness.
- Around 5% of haemorrhagic colitis cases progress into the more serious haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS).
- HUS usually occurs around seven days after the onset of the initial illness and is characterised by kidney failure associated with anaemia.



## Who is at risk?

- Most people are at risk of developing symptoms of haemorrhagic colitis and will usually recover completely after approximately eight days.
- Children under five are usually most susceptible to developing HUS, although the elderly and those with a weakened immune system are also vulnerable to the disease.

## How can the risk be reduced?

- Maintain hygienic conditions and minimise cross-contamination when handling and preparing food, particularly when serving to children.
- Cook all beef and beef products to an internal temperature of around 72°C.
- Wash all fruit and vegetables thoroughly prior to consumption.
- Avoid unpasteurised juices and unpasteurised milk and milk products.