

Escherichia coli (E. coli)

What is it?

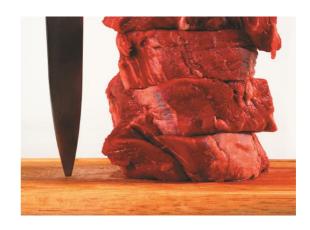
E. coli are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals. Although most strains are harmless, several are known to produce toxins that can cause diarrhoea. One particular *E. coli* strain called O157:H7 can cause severe diarrhea and kidney damage.

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.

