

Escherichia coli

Most strains of E.coli are harmless, however some can cause food poisoning.

WHAT IS IT?

E.coli are a common type of bacteria that live in human and animal intestines. Although most strains of the bacteria are harmless, some are known to cause food poisoning.

FOOD POISONING

E.coli enters the body through the consumption of food containing the bacteria. Eating rare or inadequately cooked meat is the most common way that E.coli food poisoning occurs.

Other common sources of food poisoning include:

- Crab meat and scallops;
- Unpasteurised milk;
- Salads or sandwiches containing raw vegetables;
- Person to person infection from contaminated hands.

THE SYMPTOMS

Developing 18 to 36 hours after ingesting the bacteria, E.coli food poisoning causes a range of symptoms. While some people experience only mild diarrhoea, most cases develop severe diarrhoea (possibly containing blood) and abdominal cramps. Other symptoms can include a mild fever, nausea or vomiting. If symptoms are present, seek advice from your doctor.

E.COLI STRAINS

E.coli food poisoning is usually caused by one of the following strains:

- Enteropathogenic E.coli (EPEC) – causes diarrhoea, especially in infants;
- Enterotoxigenic E.coli (ETEC) – causes gastroenteritis;
- Enteroinvasive E.coli (EIEC) – causes watery stools, often with blood and mucus;
- Enterohaemorrhagic E.coli (EHEC, VTEC) – can cause haemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS), a serious disease that destroys red blood cells and causes kidney failure. Potentially fatal, a prolonged hospital stay is often required to recover from the disease.

HOW TO AVOID FOOD POISONING

- Wash your hands thoroughly with warm, soapy water before preparing food and between handling raw and ready-to-eat foods.
- Thoroughly cook all meat products.
- Keep raw meat separate from cooked and ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash all raw salad ingredients thoroughly.
- Use only the refrigerator or microwave to defrost meat.
- Ensure hot foods are kept above 60oC and cold food below 5oC.
- Refrigerate all leftover food as soon as possible after cooking. Leftover food should be thoroughly and rapidly reheated before eating.
- Avoid drinking untreated water and unpasteurised milk.
- Clean all utensils (e.g. tongs, knives, cutting boards, plates, etc) used to prepare raw foods before using them with cooked or ready-to-eat food.
- Avoid preparing food if you have any symptoms associated with E.coli food poisoning. Food handlers should notify their employer and not return to work until symptoms have ceased.

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Food handlers are required to report to their supervisor if they have symptoms, or know that they are a carrier of a food borne illness. Such persons are obliged not to handle food until they are recovered or, if a carrier, free of the organism of concern.

SEE ALSO

- Food poisoning – General Information
- Food poisoning - Campylobacter
- Food poisoning - Clostridium botulinum
- Food poisoning - Clostridium perfringens
- Food poisoning – Bacillus Cereus
- Food poisoning - Staphylococcus
- Food poisoning - Listeria monocytogenes
- Food poisoning - Salmonella

CONTACT DETAILS

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