

Public Advisory Note 5 E. Coli 0157

Introduction

[Escherichia coli 0157](#) (E.coli 0157) is a bacteria responsible for range of illness in humans from mild diarrhoea to severe colitis. Laboratory confirmation of E.coli 0157 in the UK have risen from less than 10 each year in the early 1980's to 1039 in 1995.

What symptoms can occur?

Diarrhoea is the commonest symptom produced by E.coli 0157 infection. The incubation period for the illness is usually between one and six days with an average of about two days. It is usually self-limiting mild diarrhoea which settles within two weeks. However it can progress to a more serious illness with severe abdominal pains and bloody diarrhoea.

A few cases may go onto develop extreme illness which can lead to acute kidney failure with anaemia. The most likely to affect children, and to a lesser extent the elderly.

How is the infection diagnosed?

As the infections are usually self limiting, only simple measures such as plenty of fluids, a light diet and rest are needed. If kidney failure should develop, then this is treated by conventional means in hospital.

Where does the infection come from and how does it spread to humans?

Cattle are thought to be the main reservoir of infection. Several large outbreaks in the U.S.A. have been associated with undercooked beef burgers. Other suggested sources of infection include contaminated pasteurised and un-pasteurised milk, yoghurt and faecal contaminated raw vegetables and water. Only small numbers of bacteria are necessary to cause illness. Outbreaks due to spread of infection from person to person have occurred within households, residential homes, nurseries and infant schools. In addition, direct contact with infected animals, particularly on farms or in animal sanctuaries, have also been reported as a source of infection.

What measures can be taken to control the spread of E.coli 0157?

As the recognition of E.coli 0157 infections is fairly recent, the best way of controlling the disease are still being determined and may be modified in the light of future experiences. However good personal hygiene and adequate hand washing and toilet facilities are extremely important.

Furthermore the Department of Health's Chief Medical Officer advises that exposure to E.coli 0157 bacteria as well as other food poisoning organisms can be significantly reduced by cooking minced beef products such as beef burgers thoroughly until the juices run clear and there are no pink areas inside.

Vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and immunocompromised patients should avoid consumption of raw milk.

Remember always wash your hands

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