



Sedgwick County...
working for you

Division of Health

FACTS & details

about Sedgwick County Government

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E. coli (Escherichia coli)

What is *E. coli*?

Escherichia coli (*E. coli*) is a bacterium that lives in the intestines of animals and people. There are many *E. coli* strains, most of which are harmless. However, some strains, including Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* (STEC) O157:H7, produce a powerful toxin that can cause severe human illness.

How common is *E. coli* infection?

E. coli is a common cause of diarrhea. The CDC estimates about 265,000 STEC cases occur in the United States every year.

How do people become infected?

E. coli is spread by eating undercooked meat, raw vegetables, sprouts, and fruits that have been grown or washed in contaminated water; swimming in or drinking sewage contaminated water; exposure to infected animals; and eating food prepared by people who have not washed their hands after using the toilet.

What are the signs and symptoms of *E. coli* infection?

Symptoms include severe stomach cramps, diarrhea (often bloody), and vomiting. If there is fever, it is often less than 101 degrees Fahrenheit. Some infections are mild but others can be life-threatening. In some people, the infection can cause a serious complication in which the red blood cells are destroyed and the kidneys fail. This is known as hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS).

How long can you spread *E. coli*?

After exposure, symptoms appear in one to ten days and last about five to ten days. Someone with *E. coli* is contagious as long as the bacteria is found in their feces (poop).

Who is at risk for severe disease?

Anyone can become infected with *E. coli*, but children less than five years old, people with weakened immune systems, and the elderly are most at risk for severe disease.

How is *E. coli* infection treated?

E. coli infections do not usually require treatment. Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Due to increased risk of HUS, antibiotics should not be used to treat infection, and antidiarrheal agents should be avoided, unless indicated by your healthcare provider.

How can you prevent *E. coli* infection?

There is no vaccine for *E. coli*. Prevent infection by the following methods:

- Wash your hands after using the toilet, changing diapers, and preparing or eating food.
- Wash your hands after contact with animals or their environments.
- Cook poultry, ground beef, and eggs thoroughly.
- Avoid raw milk and unpasteurized dairy products.
- Avoid swallowing water when swimming or playing in natural waterways or swimming pools.
- Prevent cross contamination in food preparation areas by washing hands and surfaces after they touch raw meat.
- Wash produce thoroughly.
- People who have *E. coli* should not prepare food or drinks for others until symptoms resolve.

For More Information:

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