

Disaster Relief

What Is an E. coli Infection?



E. coli is a bacteria that causes serious infection. Hundreds of types of *E. coli* live harmlessly in the digestive tracts of humans and animals. But other strains produce powerful poisons. One strain causes bloody diarrhea and may cause severe blood problems and kidney failure if not treated.

Symptoms

Bloody diarrhea is common in confirmed cases of *E. coli* infection, but the bacteria can also cause nonbloody diarrhea. Diagnosing *E. coli* is complicated because most bacterial infections that cause diarrhea also cause a high fever. If there is no fever or only a slight fever, something other than bacteria is causing your diarrhea, such as a change in diet or stress.

Symptoms of *E. coli* infection usually end in about 7 days with no further problems. In some cases, severe blood and kidney problems can occur 2 to 14 days after the onset of the diarrhea.

Preventive Measures

As soon as a case of *E. coli* is confirmed, it is important to discuss the importance of frequent handwashing with soap and water to prevent person-to-person transmission and prevent food and beverage contamination. And, of course, continue to dispose of diapers and human waste properly. Transmission of *E. coli* is mainly caused by consuming contaminated food, inadequately cooked beef, raw milk, and fruits and vegetables contaminated by animal feces. Water has been documented to transmit *E. coli*, as well.

These following measures help reduce the incidence of *E. coli* during the aftermath of a hurricane or other natural events:

- Cook ground beef to an internal temperature of 160°F for at least 15 seconds. For chicken, turkey, and other poultry, cook to a minimum internal temperature of 165°F for 15 seconds. Cooking meat until it's not pink is not reliable. When checking the temperature, use a thermometer that is safe to use in food, such as a bimetallic, stemmed thermometer.
- Protect, purify, and chlorinate public water supplies.
- Ensure adequate hygiene procedures in childcare centers and shelters, frequently washing hands with soap and water.
- Infected people should not handle food or provide child or patient care until they get two negative stool samples collected 24 hours apart.

Specific Treatment

Fluid and electrolyte replacement are important, especially when there are signs of dehydration and when diarrhea is watery. The elderly and young children need to be monitored carefully to prevent dehydration and further complications. Antibiotics are not usually recommended. Avoid anti-diarrheal products such as Pepto diarrhea control, Immodium, Immodium A-D, and Kaopectate II. These products slow the rate food and waste products move through the intestine. Also, avoid medications such as Pepto-Bismol, aspirin, and ibuprofen (Advil) because of the risk of increased bleeding from the intestines.

Information Sheet 1688 (POD-06-18)

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Produced by Agricultural Communications.

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Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, Director