

# E. coli

What you can do to reduce the risk of becoming ill due to E. coli

## What is E. coli

Escherichia coli (known as E. coli) is a type of bacteria that can be found in the intestines of animals and humans. Many types (strains) of E. coli are harmless to humans, but some can cause serious illness. These strains produce toxins called 'Shiga toxins'.

There are different types of Shiga toxin-producing E. coli (STEC) that can cause illness, such as STEC O157. This strain is responsible for most cases in the UK but other strains, which are referred to as non-O157 STECs are also capable of causing severe disease.?

People who are most likely to suffer severe symptoms are young children, pregnant women, people with an underlying health condition (e.g. cancer, diabetes, liver and kidney disease) and older people.

You can find information on the symptoms of E. coli and how it makes you ill on the following sites:

- [NHS - Food poisoning](#)
- [NIDirect - Food poisoning](#)
- [NHS 111 Wales - Food poisoning](#)
- [UKHSA - Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli: guidance, data and analysis](#)

## Video: FSA explains E. coli

## How E. coli is spread

E. coli can be found in foods such as raw and undercooked meats (for example minced meat), raw milk, dairy products made from raw milk (unpasteurised milk) or contaminated fresh produce such as fruits and leafy green vegetables.

There is a risk of spreading the bacteria through cross-contamination in, for example by contact between raw and cooked foods and contaminated equipment and utensils or by poor food hygiene (e.g. not washing hands before preparing food)

It can also be spread through contact with people who have the illness, and through pets and their faeces.

## How you can reduce the risk of E.coli?at home

To reduce the risk of E. coli, it's important to:?

- [cook food correctly](#) by following the guidance on time and temperature – this will kill E. coli, including STEC
- [wash fruit and vegetables](#), including salad leaves, that will be eaten raw or before cooking?
- [wash your hands](#) regularly with soap and water before, during and after meal preparation??
- [avoid cross-contamination?](#) which might lead to bacteria passing from raw foods to fresh, cooked or foods that are ready to eat via things like reusable shopping bags, knives, dirty surfaces and chopping boards.
- [chill your food?](#) below 5°C - this will stop or significantly slow the growth of bacteria including E. coli
- use food and drink by the [use-by?date?](#) on the label, even if it looks and smells fine - eating food after this date could put your health at risk as you can't see, smell or taste bacteria which make you ill

FSA Explains

### **How E. coli O157 makes people ill**

Although many forms of E. coli are harmless and can help the breakdown of food, some can cause serious food poisoning such as E. coli O157.

Vero cytotoxin E. coli (VTEC) O157 produces a toxin which is able to rupture and destroy red blood cells. The destruction of the cells can lead to a serious condition called hemolytic-uremic syndrome (HUS) and kidney failure.