

# Fact Sheet: Shiga-toxin producing E. coli (STEC)

## What is Shiga-toxin producing E. coli (STEC)?

E. coli are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals. There are many strains of E. coli bacteria. Most of them are harmless. However, some kinds of E. coli cause illness by making a toxin. These bacteria are referred to as Shiga-toxin producing E. coli (STEC). These infections may be associated with other severe problems, such as bleeding from irritation of the bowel, kidney damage, and blood cell damage.

## What are the symptoms?

- Diarrhea (which often becomes bloody)
- Stomach cramps
- Vomiting
- Mild fever (if present)

Symptoms appear from 2 to 10 days after exposure, usually 3 to 4 days.

## How is it spread?

- Can be spread from cattle to people through eating raw or undercooked beef (especially ground beef).
- By eating contaminated foods, such as melons, lettuce, spinach, alfalfa sprouts, or soft cheeses made from raw milk.
- By drinking unpasteurized milk, apple cider, or contaminated water.
- Infected individuals may spread the illness to others if they do not wash their hands properly. Adults infected with E. coli are contagious for a week; children for up to 3 weeks.
- By swallowing contaminated lake or pool water.
- By touching contaminated surfaces in petting zoos or other animal exhibits.

## How is it treated?

- If you think you have been exposed, call your doctor immediately for a stool sample test and treatment recommendations. As with any diarrhea, it is important to drink plenty of fluids (such as fruit juice and water) to prevent dehydration.
- If you are a food service worker, a healthcare worker, or a childcare worker: report your illness to your supervisor and do not work until your illness is over and your medical provider says it is OK to return to work.

## How is it prevented?

- Wash hands thoroughly after handling raw meat.
- Fully cook all ground beef products to 160 degrees Fahrenheit (use a thermometer).
- Do not place cooked meat on the same plate that was used to hold raw meat.
- Use two cutting boards, one for meat and one for other foods. Wash cutting boards and counters after each use with hot, soapy water.
- Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly with water before eating.
- Consume only pasteurized milk and milk products.
- Wash hands after going to the bathroom (or changing a diaper) and before preparing or eating food. Teach your children to do the same.
- Keep infected children away from other children and from the elderly, and follow your doctor's advice about returning to school or day care.
- Avoid swallowing water from swimming pools, lakes, ponds and streams.
- Wash hands after going to a petting zoo or handling animals.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*