



Just the Facts... **Escherichia Coli O157:H7 Information for Food Service Personnel**

The following information is being provided to you in order to give you some basic information on how to prevent illness caused by improper handling and cooking ground beef. Specifically, what the consumer can do to alleviate his or her risk of illness.

What is E. coli O157:H7? Bacteria are everywhere in the environment. Some bacteria are harmful if eaten and others are not. One of the bacteria that can be harmful, and at times deadly, is Escherichia coli O157:H7, or E. coli O157:H7 for short. This bacteria is commonly found in the intestinal tract of meat animals and can potentially contaminate muscle meat during slaughter and processing. Grinding the meat, as done when processing ground beef, can potentially expose more meat product to the bacteria and spread the contamination throughout the product. What makes E. coli O157:H7 so dangerous is that it can survive refrigeration and freezing and then multiply at temperatures just above refrigeration temperatures. It also produces a very potent toxin that causes severe illness and even death if consumed.

What is the risk of illness caused by E. coli O157:H7? The answer to this question depends on the type of food and how the food is processed, transported, handled, and most importantly prepared. Although E. coli O157:H7 has been found in other foods such as unpasteurized fruit juice, unpasteurized milk, and unwashed produce, the greatest risk comes from eating contaminated ground beef that has been improperly stored, handled, or cooked. In addition, some groups or people are more at risk than others. Young children, the elderly, and those individuals with weak immune systems are more at risk of illness caused by contaminated food.

What can be done to reduce the risk of illness caused by E. coli O157:H7? The first step in preventing illness is to keep all meats in the refrigerator or freezer in order to maintain them at 40 °F or less. Keeping meat cold while it is stored or during defrosting is essential to prevent growth of bacteria. To safely defrost, ground beef, it is best to do so in a refrigerator or other specially designed defrosting device such as a Safe-T-Thaw®. (Safe-T-Thaw® is a registered trademark of Hobart Corp., Troy, OH 45374.)

The most important step in preventing illness caused by E. coli O157:H7 is proper cooking. Eating raw or undercooked ground beef can be very dangerous. To be sure that all the bacteria are destroyed, cook all ground beef to an internal temperature of 160 °F. Using a digital meat thermometer is highly recommended. Serving a pink or red ground beef patty is a significant risk factor for foodborne illness.

For more information about E. coli O157:H7, please refer to:

1. Focus on Ground Beef, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service - Website: www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/focusgb.htm
2. Escherichia coli O157:H7, National Centers for Disease Control – Website: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_ecoli.htm