



Just the Facts...

Escherichia Coli O157:H7 Information for Consumers

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 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 bacterium 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 the average consumer do to reduce the risk of illness caused by E. coli O157:H7? Prevention of illness starts at the grocery store. When buying ground beef, always select a package that is cold to the touch and without rips or tears in the plastic container. If possible, place packages of raw product in plastic bags to protect ready-to-eat items from possible contamination. After purchasing meat products, go directly home and place the meat in the refrigerator or freezer in order to maintain it at 40 °F or less. The best way to safely thaw ground beef is in the refrigerator. Keeping meat cold while it is defrosting is essential to prevent growth of bacteria. Cook or refreeze it within one or two days.

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. Eating a pink or red ground beef patty without first verifying that it is at the safe temperature of 160 °F 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