

From the Chief Medical Officer
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Department of
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AN ROINN

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HSS(MD) 9/2008

To: Chief Executives of Boards and Trusts
Medical Directors of Trusts
Directors of Public Health
All General Practitioners, including locums
All Microbiologists
Consultants in Communicable Disease Control
Infectious Disease Physicians
Regional Epidemiologists

Your Ref:
Our Ref: HSS(MD) 9/2008
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URGENT COMMUNICATION

Dear Colleague

E.COLI 0157 OUTBREAK IN EASTERN BOARD AREA – UPDATE AND GENERAL INFORMATION ON E.COLI 0157

The Eastern Health and Social Services Board (EHSSB) have declared an outbreak of E.Coli 0157 associated with Ravenscroft nursery school in Belfast. There is currently one confirmed case in a child who attends the nursery and 2 other presumptive cases, one in a child who also attends the nursery and the third is a sibling of this child. The Eastern Board are undertaking a full outbreak investigation in collaboration with Environmental Health staff in Belfast City Council.

This issue has received extensive coverage in regional and local media. Of note there has been a link made with a second nursery school in Belfast, Cathedral Nursery, in West Belfast. The staff and pupils at this nursery are being offered testing as a precautionary measure, there are no cases of E.Coli 0157 associated with this nursery. There is currently no evidence of wider spread within the community but the Eastern Board are continuing to monitor this.

What is E.Coli 0157?

E.Coli 0157 is one of multiple strains of the bacterium *Escherichia Coli*. Most of the strains are harmless, however the 0157 strain produces a powerful toxin that can cause severe illness. E.Coli 0157 is a relatively rare cause of infectious gastroenteritis in the UK, however the disease can be very severe particular in infants, young children and the elderly and sometimes fatal.

The Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre in Northern Ireland monitor E.Coli 0157 infections in conjunction with the Health and Social Services Boards. Cases of E.Coli 0157 are notified to the Health and Social Services Boards who have a protocol in place for the investigation of every case.

How do you get E.Coli 0157?

E.Coli 0157 bacteria is commonly found in the gut of cattle and other farm animals. The ways you can become infected are as follows:

- (a) By eating infected food, usually meat, unpasturised milk and cheese.
- (b) By having contact with infected animals such as during visits to farms and animal sanctuaries.
- (c) From contact with other people with E.Coli 0157 infection through inadequate hand washing after using the toilet and/or before food handling, particularly in households, nurseries and infant schools.
- (d) From eating unwashed vegetables which may have become infected due to contact with manure from infected cattle.
- (e) From drinking or swimming in infected water such as river water, stream water or water from drinking wells.

Clinical picture of E.Coli 0157

Some or all of the following symptoms may be present:

- Diarrhoea – about 50% of people also have blood in their stools.
- Stomach cramps.
- Fever.

It is possible that some infected people may have mild diarrhoea and no symptoms at all, a small number of people may develop Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome (HUS) which is associated with kidney failure, anaemia and bleeding. Children under the age of 5 years and elderly people are more likely to develop complications.

It can take between 3 and 4 days to develop symptoms after swallowing an infectious dose of E.Coli 0157. Symptoms can last up to 2 weeks, longer in cases with complications. Most people clear the bacteria after about one week but young children may continue to carry it for longer periods.

Action

General Practitioners and Hospital Clinicians should be vigilant for the occurrence of E.Coli 0157 in patients presenting with relevant clinical symptoms and any of the risk factors detailed above. Suspected or confirmed cases must be immediately notified to the Director of Public Health at the local Health and Social Services Board.

Prevention of infection from E.Coli 0157

The pre-requisite is to handle food and drink safely. This includes:

- Ensuring that minced meat products like beef burgers or meat loaf are fully cooked so that they are coloured the whole way through and there is no blood running from them.
- Keep cooked and uncooked meat separately.
- Uncooked should be stored in the bottom shelf of the fridge to avoid dripping raw meat uses onto other food.
- Cooked food should never be put back in a place which has had fresh uncooked meat on it.
- Salads and vegetables that are to be eaten raw must be thoroughly washed.
- Avoid eating and drinking unpasturised milk and dairy products.
- Boil any drinking water if you aren't sure of its source.
- Do not swim in water that may be contaminated.
- Observing good personal hygiene is very important in prevention of infection. This includes thoroughly washing hands after using the toilet, handling raw meat, before meals and after contact with animals.
- Ensure children wash their hands with warm water and soap after contact with animals, particularly while on farm visits.
- If someone in the household has E.Coli infection wash all dirty clothes, bedding and towels in the washing machine on the hottest cycle possible.
- Clean toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins after use with detergent and hot water followed by household disinfectant.
- If you have E.Coli infection you should not prepare food for others.