

# SHIGA TOXIN-PRODUCING ESCHERICHIA COLI (STEC) FACT SHEET

## What is STEC?

*Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) are bacteria that normally live in the digestive tracts of humans and animals. There are many types of *E. coli*. Most are harmless and actually are an important part of a healthy human digestive tract. Some kinds of *E. coli* cause disease by making a toxin called Shiga toxin. These types of *E. coli* are called STEC for short. Cattle are the major source of STEC illnesses.

## Who can get STEC infection?

Anyone.

## What are the symptoms of STEC infection?

The symptoms of STEC infection include diarrhea (often bloody), severe stomach cramps, and vomiting. Occasionally, a slight fever may be present. In some cases, there are no symptoms at all. Around 5–10% of persons infected with STEC develop a potentially life-threatening complication known as hemolytic uremic syndrome. Very young children and the elderly are most often affected by complications.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within 3–4 days after being infected but may take as long as 10 days to appear.

## How does STEC spread?

STEC can be spread in several ways:

- Eating contaminated foods, especially ground beef that is undercooked. The contaminated meat may look and smell normal.
- Swimming in or drinking sewage-contaminated water.
- Direct person-to-person spread through the feces of an infected individual. This occurs when hygiene and hand washing practices are inadequate.

- Handling animals or pets that are contaminated with these bacteria.

## How is an STEC infection treated?

There is no specific treatment for STEC. Most people recover within 5–7 days if they drink adequate fluids to prevent dehydration. Antibiotics should not be used to treat this infection.

## How can people protect themselves against STEC infection?

The following steps will decrease your risk of becoming infected or spreading this infection:

- Cook all meats thoroughly.
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly, especially those that will not be cooked.
- Wash hands, cutting boards and other kitchen work surfaces and utensils with soap and hot water immediately after they have been in contact with raw meat or poultry to prevent cross-contamination.
- Do not drink raw milk, unpasteurized dairy products or unpasteurized juices (such as fresh apple cider).
- Do not swallow water when swimming or playing in lakes, ponds, streams, or pools.
- Wash your hands with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds, before preparing or eating food and after contact with animals or their environments.

## Where can I get more information?

Information about STEC and other related health topics can be found at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit [www.doh.dc.gov](http://www.doh.dc.gov) or call (202) 442-9371.