

# E. coli -- What You Need to Know

## Prevention

*Escherichia coli* (abbreviated as *E. coli*) are bacteria found in the environment, foods, and intestines of people and animals.

Most *E. coli* are harmless and are actually an important part of a healthy human intestinal tract. However, some *E. coli* can cause diarrhea, urinary tract infections, respiratory illness, bloodstream infections, and other illnesses. The types of *E. coli* that can cause illness can be transmitted through contaminated water or food, or through contact with animals or people.

## What are Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli*?

*E. coli* bacteria cause disease when they make a toxin called Shiga toxin. The bacteria that make these toxins are called “Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli*,” or STEC for short.

## How can I prevent a STEC infection?

- **Know your chances of getting food poisoning.** People with higher chances for foodborne illness are pregnant women, newborns, children, older adults, and those with weak immune systems, such as people with cancer, diabetes, or HIV/AIDS.
- **Practice proper hygiene, especially good handwashing.**
  - Wash your hands thoroughly after using the bathroom and changing diapers.
  - Wash your hands thoroughly before and after preparing or eating food.
  - Wash your hands thoroughly after contact with animals or their environments (at farms, petting zoos, fairs, even your own backyard).
  - Wash your hands thoroughly before preparing and feeding bottles or foods to an infant or toddler, before touching an infant or toddler’s mouth, and

before touching pacifiers or other things that go into an infant or toddler's mouth.

- Keep all objects that enter infants' and toddlers' mouths (such as pacifiers and teething rings) clean.
- If soap and water aren't available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol (check the product label to be sure). These alcohol-based products can quickly reduce the number of germs on hands in some situations, but they are not a substitute for washing with soap and running water.
- **Follow the [four steps to food safety](#) when preparing food:** clean, separate, cook, and chill.
- **Wash fruits and vegetables well under running water**, unless the package says the contents have already been washed.
- **Cook meats thoroughly:**
  - To kill harmful germs, cook beef steaks and roasts to an internal temperature of at least 145°F (62.6°C) and allow to rest for 3 minutes after you remove meat from the grill or stove.
  - Cook ground beef and pork to a minimum internal temperature of 160°F (70°C).
  - **Always use a food thermometer** to check that the meat has reached a [safe internal temperature](#) because you can't tell whether meat is safely cooked by looking at its color.
- **Don't cause cross-contamination** in food preparation areas. Thoroughly wash hands, counters, cutting boards, and utensils after they touch raw meat.
- **Avoid raw milk, unpasteurized dairy products, and unpasteurized juices** (such as fresh apple cider).
- **Don't swallow water when swimming** and when playing in lakes, ponds, streams, swimming pools, and backyard "kiddie" pools.

For more information about reducing your risk of foodborne illness, visit the US Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and [Inspection Service website](#).

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