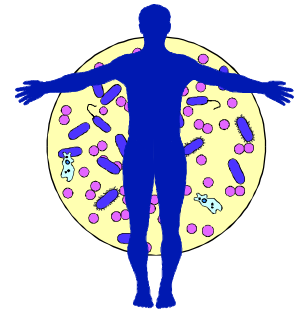


E. coli 0157

Verocytotoxin producing Escherichia coli (VTEC)

What is VTEC?

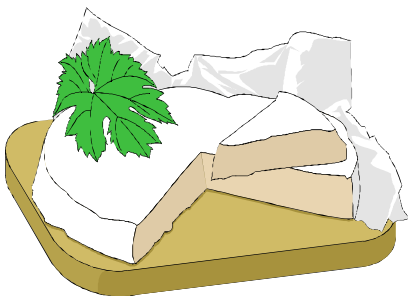
Verocytotoxin producing Escherichia coli (VTEC) are bacteria which can cause illness ranging from mild diarrhoea to severe inflammation of the large intestine. There are several different VTEC bacteria and the most commonly occurring one is called E. coli 0157.



What are the symptoms?

Diarrhoea is the most common symptom and is usually mild, settling within two weeks, but it can sometimes be more severe with abdominal pain and bloody diarrhoea. Around half of all those infected have blood in their stools. Some people may not show any symptoms. A very small number of patients develop what is called haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS), which is a form of acute kidney failure. HUS is a more likely complication in children and the elderly and requires admission to hospital for treatment. The clotting mechanism of the blood may sometimes be affected but this is very rare indeed.

Where does the infection come from?



VTEC are found in the gut of some cattle and other domesticated animals. Transmission to humans occurs through eating contaminated foodstuffs particularly beef products, such as undercooked beefburgers or beef mince, unpasteurised milk and cheese and unwashed vegetables. Infection may follow contact with infected animals, particularly at farms and animal sanctuaries.

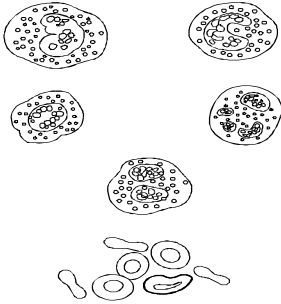
How does VTEC spread?

Only a small number of VTEC need to be swallowed for infection to occur. The bacteria can spread from person to person through inadequate handwashing after using the WC and/or before food-handling, particularly in households, nurseries and infant schools.

What is the incubation period?

The incubation period, i.e. the length of time from swallowing the organism until the start of symptoms, is usually between 1 and 6 days but may be as long as 14 days.

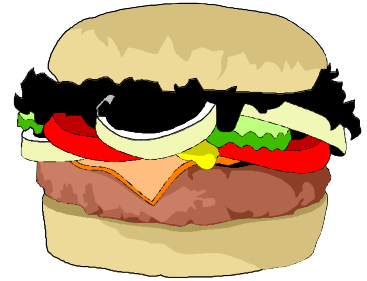
How will I know if I have VTEC?



Diagnosis of VTEC infection is usually confirmed by growing the bacterium in the laboratory from a stool sample. Occasionally a blood sample may be taken to look for antibodies to the organism. You should always tell your GP if you, or a member of your family, have acute diarrhoeal symptoms which last for more than 24 hours. This is particularly important if there is blood in the stools.

How can VTEC be prevented?

Good food handling practice is essential. This includes storing cooked and uncooked meats separately, ensuring that minced or ground meat products, such as beefburgers and sausages, are thoroughly cooked and washing all salads and vegetables to be eaten raw. Good hand hygiene practice is also a very important measure in the prevention of VTEC. Hands must always be thoroughly washed after using the WC, before preparing food, after handling raw meat and refuse, and before meals.



How long should I stay off school or work?

Usually you can return to work as soon as you are symptom free and feel well. However, if you are working with food, or with the young, elderly or those in poor health, you must tell your employer about your illness. Where VTEC infection has been definitely confirmed clearance specimens will be necessary before returning for food handlers, some health care staff and also children attending playgroups, childminders, and nurseries. The actual clearance criteria will be determined in each case according to advice given by the Consultant in Communicable Disease Control.

For further information please contact:

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