

EHEC infection, patient information

County Medical Officers' Infection Prevention Sheet

What is EHEC?

EHEC stands for Enterohaemorrhagic E. coli which is an intestinal bacteria that causes diarrhoea - sometimes mixed with blood - and abdominal pain. Some EHEC sufferers do not have any symptoms at all. The incubation period between exposure to EHEC and onset of symptoms is usually 2 - 4 days. The symptoms normally pass within one week but the bacteria can remain in the intestine for a few more weeks. Antibiotics do not usually have any effect. In rare cases of EHEC, the infection may be complicated by renal (kidney) symptoms, also known as Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome (HUS). This sometimes requires dialysis treatment for a short term only.

How is the disease transmitted and when are you considered infected?

The disease is normally transmitted through contaminated food or drink, such as meat products (minced beef), unpasteurised dairy products or fruit and vegetables contaminated in connection with irrigation or fertilisation. It is also possible to be infected through contact with cattle, manure or contaminated bathing water. The bacteria is destroyed by heating which is why well cooked or fried food does not present a risk. Remember that cooked food may still become contaminated if using not sufficiently cleaned kitchen utensils or chopping boards. Deep freezing does not destroy the EHEC bacteria. Person-to-person infection may, for example, occur through physical contact after a toilet visit. Consequently, it is important to be extra vigilant with your personal toilet and hand hygiene. The level of contagiousness is reduced as the symptoms subside. If you work in healthcare/nursing or with food, it is particularly important to remain at home until the diarrhoea has passed and your faeces are back to normal.

You can normally return to work or school once you are free of symptoms and continue to follow the precautionary and hygiene advice given below. Preschool children and people in certain risk professions must, however, as a general rule, be able to provide at least one stool sample without the EHEC bacteria before they can be allowed to return to school or work. Your doctor will assess when you/your child is ready to return to work/school.

What should you think about in order not to infect others? Precautionary and hygiene advice:

- You must not work when you have diarrhoea.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after every toilet visit and before handling food or eating.
- Use liquid soap and your own towel or single use towels.
- Keep the toilet and washbasin clean.
- If your child is still in nappies and a carrier of the disease, make sure to wash your hands thoroughly after each nappy change. Disinfect and keep your changing table clean. Place used nappies in plastic bags and discard with the rest of your household rubbish.
- You must not swim or enter a swimming pool area while still suffering with diarrhoea.
- Children suffering with diarrhoea must not attend or return to their school until they have provided at least one stool sample without the presence of the EHEC bacteria. With certain types of EHEC, the child will be allowed to return to school when he/she has

been well and symptom free for some time. Your doctor will assess when your child is ready to return to school.

- According to European food legislation, if working with unpackaged food products, you are obliged to notify your supervisor immediately you are diagnosed as infected with EHEC.

People in the following risk professions are obliged to provide at least one stool sample without the EHEC bacteria in addition to which, they must be redeployed or suspended from work until assessed free from infection by a doctor:

- Anyone who professionally prepares or handles unpackaged food products
- Anyone who professionally cares for young children or severely immunocompromised patients

With certain types of EHEC, however, you can often return to work once you have been well and symptom free for some time. Your doctor will assess when you are ready to return to work.

According to the Swedish Communicable Diseases Act, infection with EHEC is a public health hazard. You must therefore follow the precautionary advice given by your doctor and assist in the best possible way with contact tracing to identify the source of the infection and other possibly infected people.

You have the right to ask your local County Medical Officer to review and reassess the precautionary advice given. However, until the review and reassessment have been finalised, you must follow the advice and instructions given.