

EHEC

County Medical Officers' infection prevention sheet, patient information

What is EHEC?

EHEC stands for Enterohaemorrhagic *E. coli*, which is an intestinal bacterium which can cause diarrhoea, sometimes bloody, and abdominal pain. Some people experience no symptoms at all. The time between infection and falling ill is usually two to four days. The symptoms usually pass within one week, but the bacterium can remain in the gut for another few weeks. Antibiotic normally have no effect. In rare cases, the infection can be complicated by renal symptoms, known as haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS). This sometimes requires short-term dialysis.

How is the disease transmitted, and when are carriers infectious?

The disease is normally transmitted through contaminated food or drink, such as meat products (minced beef), unpasteurised dairy products or fruit and vegetables contaminated during watering or fertilisation. It is also possible to be infected through contact with cattle, manure or contaminated bathing water. The bacteria are destroyed by heating, which is why food which is well boiled or fried does not present a risk. Remember that cooked food can be contaminated by kitchen utensils or chopping boards which have not been cleaned, for example. Deep freezing does not destroy the bacterium. Contaminated fingers after toilet contact, for example, may cause person-to-person transmission. This is why it is important to take care with hand and toilet hygiene. The level of contagiousness is reduced as the symptoms subside. If you work in healthcare/nursing or with food, it is particularly important for you to remain at home until the diarrhoea has passed and your faeces are normal.

Anyone who is free of symptoms can often remain at work or school by following the rules of conduct and hygiene advice below. However, some professions require redeployment or suspension until you are deemed to be free of infection.

What should you remember so as not to infect others? Rules of conduct and hygiene advice:

- You must not work when you have diarrhoea.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after visiting the toilet, before handling foods and before meals.
- Use liquid soap and your own towel or single-use towels.
- Keep the toilet and washbasin clean.
- If children in nappies are carriers of the disease, wash your hands thoroughly after changing their nappies. Keep your changing table very clean. Place used nappies in plastic bags which are then discarded with the rest of your refuse.
- You must not swim in a pool while you have diarrhoea.
- Children suffering from diarrhoea must not attend preschool, and they must not return there until they have submitted at least one stool sample which does not show the presence of EHEC bacteria.
- If you work with unpackaged foods, according to European food legislation you are obliged to notify your supervisor immediately if you are infectious.

People in the following risk professions are obliged to submit at least one stool sample, and they must be redeployed or suspended until they are deemed by their doctor to be free of infection:

- Anyone who prepares or handles unpackaged foods in a professional capacity
- Anyone who cares for infants or severely immunocompromised patients in a professional capacity

Infection with EHEC is what is known as a public health hazard according to the Swedish Communicable Diseases Act. Therefore, you are obliged to follow the rules of conduct given to you by your doctor and to assist with contact tracing which aims to locate the source of the infection or other people who may have been infected.

You may request reassessment of the rules of conduct by the County Medical Officer in your county. You must follow the rules assigned to you before any such assessment is complete.