

FACT SHEET

Vero cytotoxin-producing Escherichia coli (VTEC) O157

Common clinical features

Diarrhoea which may be mild to severe and can contain a large amount of blood (haemorrhagic colitis). In severe cases haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS) may occur leading to renal failure, particularly in the very young and very old.

Incubation period

Generally 1 – 6 days

Where is it found?

The gastrointestinal tract of cattle, sheep, pigs and some wild animals e.g. rabbits.

How is it acquired by affected individuals?

From contaminated food generally animal products – meat, particularly undercooked beef, milk, cheese and occasionally contaminated vegetables. Direct contact with infected animals on farms or animal sanctuaries, or contaminated land. Person to person spread can occur by direct contact (faecal oral), particularly in households, nurseries and infant schools.

How does the laboratory confirm the diagnosis?

E.coli are cultured from faeces on selective media and the O157 strain has special biochemical characteristics. Presumptive results are usually available within 2 days. Other VTEC (non-O157) are a much less common cause of illness. Suspected *E.coli* strains are confirmed at the Reference Laboratory and tested for toxin production. Suspected foods are tested when outbreaks occur.

How is it treated?

Rehydration and symptomatic treatment of diarrhoea. Some reports suggest that antibiotics may be harmful rather than beneficial (killing the bacteria and releasing more toxins into the bloodstream). Hospital treatment is required for severe cases. HUS is one of the most common causes of acute renal failure in children.