

Verotoxigenic Escherichia Coli (VTEC)

Information Sheet

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What is it?

VTEC is a stomach illness caused by the *Escherichia Coli (E-coli)* bacteria which live in the intestines (gut) of people and animals.

It is a short term illness that can make you feel very sick in the stomach and gut, and cause bloody and runny poos.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms usually start 2 or 3 days after contact with the *E-coli* bacteria, but may start up to 10 days later.

Symptoms include:

- stomach pain
- diarrhoea, pronounced dye-a-rea (runny poo). This can sometimes be bloody.
- fever
- nausea (sickness in the stomach and an urge to vomit)
- headache.

However some people who are infected do not have symptoms.

If you have these symptoms or think you might have VTEC you need to see a doctor. You will need to give the doctor a poo sample to test for it.

How serious is it?

People usually make a complete recovery and have no long lasting problems.

Some people may have a drop in red blood cells (anaemia), or develop blood clotting and kidney problems. These issues can cause ongoing health problems that can be very serious. Children and the elderly are most at risk of developing serious problems.

VTEC is a notifiable disease under the Health Act. This means your doctor must tell the District Health Board (DHB) if you have it.

People with VTEC with jobs where it could be easily spread, such as working with food, or in childcare or health care, will be contacted by a Health Protection Officer to work out how they got VTEC (in case other people might get sick the same way).

Who is most at risk?

You are more likely to get VTEC if you have contact with sick animals, have poor hand or food hygiene, drink raw milk or drink untreated water.

Children who are 5 years old and younger, adults over 65 years old and people with weakened immune systems are the most likely to have severe symptoms.

How could I get infected?

You get infected when you swallow the *E-coli* bacteria. This can happen when you:

- eat food that has been undercooked, contaminated or poorly handled. *E-coli* bacteria have been found most commonly in uncooked vegetables, meat, and raw milk but can also be spread by food touched by an infected food handler
- touch infected farm animals (such as chickens, sheep, cattle, pigs), household pets (including cats and dogs, and birds, and wild animals (rodents, birds). These infected animals often do not show signs of being sick
- drink untreated water. Animals can contaminate water collected from roofs, bores, creeks, lakes and streams.

You can infect other people for up to 2 weeks while the *E-coli* bacteria is in your body and poo.

How do I protect myself and others?

There is no vaccine to prevent VTEC.

To avoid getting VTEC:

- regularly wash your hands with soap and dry them thoroughly, especially after contact with animals, going to the toilet, changing a nappy, caring for a sick person and before preparing or eating food
- ensure food (particularly minced meat) is properly cooked (not pink) and still hot when served
- do not drink raw (unpasteurised) milk
- store raw meat and poultry at the bottom of the fridge below other foods
- wash fruits and vegetables carefully with safe water, particularly if you eat them raw
- clean and disinfect surfaces and things that might have been touched by poo
- take your pet to the vet if it has diarrhoea
- only drink water that is treated and known to be safe. If you are not sure if the water is safe boil it first. If you have your own water supply, protect it from animal and bird poo and treat the water.

To avoid spreading VTEC:

- regularly wash and dry your hands thoroughly
- do not go swimming in pools until you have had no symptoms for 2 weeks
- do not prepare food for others until you have had no symptoms for 48 hours (2 days).
- avoid contact with children, adults over 65 years old and people with weakened immune systems until you have had no symptoms for 48 hours (2 days)

Will I need to take time off work, school or preschool?

Anyone with diarrhoea or vomiting should not go to work, school or day-care until they have had no symptoms for 2 days.

Food handlers, health care workers, childcare workers and children in childcare will need clearance from a doctor or nurse before they are allowed to return. Clearance usually involves providing a poo sample to check if there for bacteria.

For further advice about who needs clearance (for example people living in the same household), please contact Hawke's Bay District Health Board Population Health on (06) 834 1815.

How is it treated?

It is important to rest and drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration. Your doctor may give medicine if needed, particularly for the very young and the elderly if they get dehydrated. Some people recover without needing medicine but some people with VTEC need to go to hospital.

Where can I get further information?

For further information on VTEC please contact your doctor or Hawke's Bay District Health Board Population Health on (06) 834 1815. You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse.