

What is *E. coli* O157:H7?

E. coli O157:H7 is one of hundreds of strains of the bacterium *Escherichia coli*. Although most strains of this bacterium are harmless and live in the intestines of healthy humans and animals, this particular strain produces a powerful toxin and can cause illness. The combination of letters and numbers in the name of the bacterium refers to specific genetic markers found on its surface, which distinguishes it from other types of *E. coli*. Eating food that has not been cooked sufficiently to kill bacteria such as *E. coli* O157:H7 can cause severe illness in humans..

Incidence of *E. coli* O157:H7

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the incidence of *E. coli* O157:H7 illnesses in the United States declined significantly between 1996 and 2004. Since 2004, illnesses in the U.S. population have leveled off at approximately one case per 100,000 people.

Commitment to Safety Research

Years ago, America's beef producers set out to reduce and eliminate *E. coli* O157:H7 and today remain committed to that goal.

- Beef producers have invested more than \$27 million since 1993 in beef safety research, leading to best practices which serve as a road map in reducing *E. coli* O157:H7. The best practices are in addition to strict oversight by USDA.
- Greater than 80 percent of the research funded by America's beef producers is used throughout the beef supply chain on a daily basis to enhance the safety of beef and beef products
- The beef industry invests approximately \$350 million every year in testing, interventions and research to ensure beef safety.

Today, because of the research and cooperative efforts with all partners in the beef supply chain, interventions to reduce and eliminate *E. coli* O157:H7 are in place on farms, in feedlots and in packing plants across the country.

Making Progress Using Best Practices

Individuals representing each segment of the production chain meet yearly to review and update the Beef Industry Food Safety Council (BIFSCo) Best Practices, which serve as a roadmap in reducing *E. coli* O157:H7.

- Individuals and companies involved in this process recognize that safety is a non-competitive issue.
- These Best Practices are ever-changing documents that are updated and reviewed as scientific and technological advances are made. These resources are available free of charge at www.bifsc.org.

Tips for Preventing Foodborne Illnesses

Consumers can take important steps in the kitchen to ensure their food is safe:

- Always wash hands, cutting boards, utensils and countertops with hot, soapy water before and after handling meat.
- Don't cross-contaminate—separate raw meat and poultry from other foods and don't place cooked food on a plate that previously contained raw meat or poultry.
- Refrigerate leftovers in shallow containers promptly after eating.
- Use an instant-read meat thermometer to ensure the proper internal temperature and eliminate any harmful bacteria.

Recommended Cooking Temperatures

Poultry 165° F

Ground Beef 160° F

Beef Roasts and Steaks 145° F

Seafood 145° F

Food Safety Questions

USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline: For food safety answers on topics including safe storage and handling of food, safe preparation, product dating, product content and more. The hotline is open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern time on weekdays year round.

Call toll-free: 888-MPHotline (888-674-6854)

Email: mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov

Online: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Home/index.asp>