Fact Sheet: Shiga-toxin producing E. coli (STEC)

What is Shiga-toxin producing E. coli (STEC)?
E. coli are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals. There are many strains of E. coli bacteria. Most of them are harmless. However, some kinds of E. coli cause illness by making a toxin. These bacteria are referred to as Shiga-toxin producing E. coli (STEC). The most common type of STEC that causes foodborne outbreaks in the U.S. is E. coli 0157. Others include E. coli 026, 0111, and 0103.

How is it spread?
STEC can be spread from cattle to people through eating raw or undercooked beef (especially ground beef). It can also be spread by consuming contaminated water or foods such as melons, lettuce, spinach, apple cider, alfalfa sprouts, or unpasteurized milk. Infected individuals may spread the illness to others via improper handwashing. An adult infected with E. coli is contagious for a week. However, children may be contagious for up to 3 weeks.

What are the symptoms?
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea (which often becomes bloody)
- Stomach cramps
- Mild fever (if present)

Symptoms appear from 2 to 10 days after exposure, usually 3 to 4 days.

How is it treated?
• If you think you have been exposed, call your doctor immediately for a stool sample test and treatment recommendations. As with any diarrhea, it is important to drink plenty of fluids (such as fruit juice and water) to prevent dehydration.
• If you are a food service worker, a healthcare worker, or a childcare worker: report your illness to your supervisor and do not work until your illness is over and your medical provider says it is OK to return to work.

How is it prevented?
• Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly with water before eating.
• Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave.
• Fully cook all ground beef products to 160 degrees Fahrenheit (use a thermometer).
• Wash hands thoroughly after handling raw meat.
• Do not place cooked meat on the same plate that was used to hold raw meat.
• Use two cutting boards, one for meat and one for other foods. Wash cutting boards and counters after each use with hot, soapy water. Disinfect surfaces with a solution of one teaspoon bleach in one-half gallon water (make a fresh solution everyday) to prevent cross-contamination.
• Consume only pasteurized milk and milk products.
• Wash hands after going to the bathroom (or changing a diaper) and before preparing or eating food. Teach your children to do the same.
• Wash hands after going to a petting zoo or handling animals.
• Keep infected children away from other children and from the elderly, and follow your doctor’s advice about returning to school or day care.
• Avoid swallowing water from swimming pools, lakes, ponds and streams.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Wayne County Public Health at 734-727-7078.

Or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at: www.cdc.gov