

VTEC/STEC infection

Public health information sheet

VTEC and STEC are short for verotoxin or shiga toxin producing E coli. People can be infected with VTEC/STEC within New Zealand. You are at higher risk of getting infected with VTEC/STEC if you have contact with livestock or care for an infant that has the illness.

VTEC/STEC are types of escherichia coli (E. coli). These are bacteria found in the intestines (bowels) of humans and animals. While some types of E. coli bacteria only produce a mild illness, the types VTEC/STEC are more dangerous. They produce poisons that can cause food poisoning and severe illness. Symptoms often include diarrhoea and stomach cramps.

How it spreads

People and animals that have VTEC/STEC pass the bacteria out of their body in their poo (faeces). If you then eat food, drink water or touch things contaminated with bacteria from the infected poo you can become infected too.

You can also get VTEC/STEC infection from:

- eating undercooked meat
- drinking unpasteurised milk
- drinking unsafe water
- not washing and drying hands carefully
- contact with people who have the illness
- contact with some farm animals or animal faeces, especially calves and cows.

Other sources of infection can include:

- changing nappies
- cleaning toilets
- handling raw meat
- gardening using manure.

Symptoms

Not everyone who has VTEC/STEC will have symptoms.

For those who do have symptoms, these can include:

- stomach pains
- vomiting
- bloody diarrhoea
- your body feeling hot.

Symptoms usually begin three to eight days after becoming infected, and can last one week.

The illness can be more serious for children under five years old, the elderly, or those with a weakened immune system.

Sometimes people with VTEC/STEC infection develop a potentially life-threatening complication known as haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS). This is a condition where your kidneys become damaged and inflamed, which causes them to stop working properly. Prompt treatment can help prevent serious complications.

If you have symptoms

- Contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.
- Explain what your symptoms are.
- Your doctor may request a faeces (poo) sample for testing.
- Testing is the only way to confirm what illness you have, and what treatment (if any) you may need.

Restrictions

If you have VTEC/STEC infection you are at risk of passing it on to others.

You should stay home from work, school or daycare until you have been free of diarrhoea symptoms for at least 48 hours (2 days).

To stop the spread of VTEC/STEC it's important to wash your hands with soapy water for 20 seconds, then dry well with a clean cloth or paper towel every time:

- after going to the toilet
- before preparing food, eating or drinking
- after changing babies nappies and gardening.

You should also avoid using public swimming pools until at least two weeks after your symptoms have gone away.

Children with symptoms should not share bathwater, as this can easily pass on the infection.

Prevention

In addition to practicing good hand hygiene, you can also prevent the spread of VTEC/STEC through:

- preparing food and drink safely
- fully cooking minced meat (such as beef burgers or meatloaf) so they are brown in colour all the way through, and no blood runs out
- never putting cooked food back on a plate which has had fresh uncooked meat on it
- carefully washing all salads and vegetables that will be eaten raw
- avoiding unpasteurised milk or dairy foods
- boiling any drinking water if you are unsure of its source or safety.

Children on farms should also be reminded to wash and dry their hands regularly.

For more information

For more information visit:

- www.arphs.nz/VTEC-STEC

If you are concerned about VTEC/STEC call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse.