E. coli O157
PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLET

What is E. coli O157?
Most E. coli bacteria found in the human gut are harmless but E. coli O157 can cause severe illness in some humans particularly in children under five and in the elderly. Grampian has one of the highest rates of E. coli O157 infection in Scotland. Most cases occur as single infections, not as part of large outbreaks.

E. coli O157 is commonly carried in the gut of a variety of domestic and wild animals including cattle, sheep, rabbits etc. It normally causes no illness in animals but can be found in their faeces. Animal faeces infected with E. coli O157 can wash off fields into private water supplies during heavy rain. Outbreaks of E. coli O157 have been linked to contaminated food or water supplies.

Only a very small number of the bacteria need to be swallowed by a vulnerable person in order to cause infection.

What are the symptoms?
The time between swallowing the bacteria and symptoms starting (the incubation time) may be between 1 and 14 days but commonly it is between 2 and 5 days. Not everyone who is infected with E. coli O157 will have symptoms.

Symptoms include:
- Diarrhoea - sometimes with blood
- Abdominal/stomach pain
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Fever

Symptoms usually settle fairly quickly but a small number of infected people may:
- Have bloody diarrhoea
- Become dehydrated
- Have severe stomach pain
- Be only able to pass small amounts of urine

These symptoms require prompt medical attention.

How does E. coli O157 spread?
1. Swallowing the bacteria
   - during and/or after direct contact with infected animal faeces e.g. spraying slurry or caring for infected animals
   - during and/or after indirect contact with infected animal faeces e.g. from clothing soiled with cattle faeces, during picnics or BBQs in the countryside
   - when eating raw or undercooked meat contaminated with the bacteria.
   - when drinking or eating unpasteurised (raw) or poorly pasteurised milk or milk products which are contaminated with the bacteria e.g. cheese.
   - on unwashed vegetables or fruit fertilised with infected manure
2. Drinking from rural or private water supplies contaminated with infected faeces
3. An infected person can pass the infection on to others fairly easily when there is a breakdown in hygiene

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What precautions do I have to take?
1. Thorough handwashing, taking care to clean the fingertips and between the fingers. Wash hands:

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<tr>
<td>• handling raw meat</td>
<td>• cooking</td>
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<td>• handling animals</td>
<td>• handling food</td>
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<td>• changing nappies</td>
<td>• eating</td>
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<td>• visiting the toilet</td>
<td>• feeding the young or elderly</td>
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<td>• Outdoor work or leisure activities</td>
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<td>• Handling clothes that are dirty from outdoor work or recreational activities</td>
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2. Ensure that all foodstuffs that are from animal sources are thoroughly cooked.
3. Do not drink unpasteurised (raw) milk or milk in bottles where the tops have been pecked by birds.
4. Do not use the same chopping board or kitchen surface or knife for raw meat and then for other foodstuffs without first washing it thoroughly to prevent the spread of infection.
5. Store cooked meat at the top of the fridge and uncooked meat at the bottom.
6. Thoroughly wash all salad vegetables and fruit before eating it
7. Remove any clothing contaminated with animal faeces (e.g. wellington boots, overalls) when entering your house and then wash your hands.

Private Water Supplies
Occasionally rural / private water supplies can become contaminated with E. coli O157. If you have a private water supply:
- Cover and fence off your supply so that animals cannot get to it.
- Divert rain water run off so that it cannot contaminate your supply.
- Make local farmers aware of your supply so that contamination by farming activity can be avoided.
- Always make sure that your supply is well maintained.
- If the water becomes a different colour to normal after heavy rainfall then boil all drinking water or use another source of water.

Your local Council’s Environmental Health Department can give you further information and help.

Will I need treatment?
Medication available from chemists to stop diarrhoea should not be used because this can lead to a more severe illness. Oral antibiotics are not recommended for people with E. coli O157.

The Health Protection Team will advise when cases can return to work, school, playgroup etc.

If you have any concerns or questions about E. coli O157, contact your GP or the Health Protection Team on 01224 558520.