

E. coli O157:

An invisible threat to your business

Bacteria, such as *E. coli* O157, are invisible to the naked eye, so they can easily be spread to food without you realising. These bacteria could make your customers seriously ill, and can even kill. Food businesses must practise good food hygiene at all times to make sure the food they produce is safe.

If your business handles raw food, which could be contaminated with *E. coli* O157, in the same establishment as ready-to-eat food, there will be a greater risk. Raw food, such as meat, fruit and vegetables, that have been in contact with the soil and are not supplied as ready-to-eat, should be handled as if they are contaminated by *E. coli* O157.

This factsheet highlights the strict measures that are necessary to control *E. coli* O157. Local authority enforcement officers will consider these measures as part of their inspections.

The key control measures involve:

- separation of equipment and staff involved in handling raw food from staff that handle ready-to-eat food
- effective cleaning and disinfection
- personal hygiene and handwashing

If there has been a risk of contamination, all work must stop until the surfaces and equipment in the area have been sufficiently cleaned and disinfected, or replaced. Any potentially contaminated food should not be supplied for consumption. If it is suspected that contaminated food has gone to consumers, appropriate action must be taken.

For more information on good food hygiene and keeping food safe, refer to your food hygiene information packs at: www.food.gov.uk/goodbusiness

Always separate

Cross-contamination is one of the most common causes of food poisoning. It happens when harmful bacteria are spread onto ready-to-eat food from other food, surfaces, hands or equipment.

Identifying separate work areas, surfaces and equipment for raw and ready-to-eat foods is the only certain way of preventing *E. coli* O157 contamination.

Stop *E. coli* O157 spreading

Work areas: Provide separate working areas, storage facilities, clothing and staff for the handling and storage of ready-to-eat food. This is the designated clean area.

Storage: Use separate storage and display facilities, including refrigerators and freezers. Where separate units are not provided, the clean areas should be sufficiently separated and clearly identifiable.

Equipment: Use separate machinery and equipment, such as vacuum packing machines, slicers and mincers, for raw and ready-to-eat foods. Where this equipment is used for ready-to-eat food, it should be kept in the designated clean area.

Utensils: Separate chopping boards and utensils must be used for raw and ready-to-eat foods unless cleaned and disinfected, ideally in a commercial dishwasher between use.

Packaging: Packaging materials for ready-to-eat food should be stored in a designated clean area and the outside surfaces of any wrapping materials for ready-to-eat food brought into a clean area must be free from contamination. It may be possible to establish an assurance of cleanliness with your supplier.

Cash registers: Cash registers and other non-food equipment should not be shared by staff handling ready-to-eat food and staff working in other areas. A single cash register can be used, but staff must ensure their hands and clothing are clean when moving into the designated clean area.

Cleaning products: Separate cleaning materials, including cloths, sponges and mops should be used for the designated clean area. Use disposable, single-use cloths wherever possible.

Clean effectively

Effective cleaning is essential to get rid of harmful bacteria and stop them spreading to food. Work surfaces and equipment should be washed regularly and disinfected between tasks. Single-use, disposable cloths should be used wherever possible.

Cleaning and disinfecting

Disinfection can be used to destroy bacteria from surfaces. However, chemical disinfectants only work if surfaces have been thoroughly cleaned first to remove grease and other dirt.

This is the two-stage process for effective disinfection:

- use a cleaning product to remove visible dirt, food particles and debris, and rinse to remove any residue
- apply disinfectant using the **correct dilution and contact time**, according to the manufacturer's instructions, and rinse with drinking water

Sanitisers have both cleaning and disinfection properties in a single product, but the two-stage cleaning and disinfecting process must still be carried out as above to ensure the sanitiser works effectively, that is, to first provide a clean surface and then again to disinfect.

Any disinfectant or sanitiser used must at least meet the official standards of **BS EN1276:1997** or **BS EN 13697:2001**. You can check with your supplier that they meet the required standards.

Heat cleaning

Heat is one of the best ways of killing bacteria, but the temperature and contact time must be sufficient to destroy harmful bacteria. For example:

Utensils: If using a dishwasher, water reservoirs should be kept above 80°C for at least 15 seconds. Dishwashers should be cleaned regularly, including the removal of food debris, plastic wrapping and limescale from the water jets, filters and drains.

Cloths: Re-usable cloths should be washed on a hot cycle, at 82°C or above, and dried between tasks.

Handle food hygienically

It is vital for staff to follow good personal hygiene practices to help prevent harmful bacteria spreading to ready-to-eat food by cross-contamination.

Handwashing

Staff should wash and dry their hands thoroughly, using a recognised technique, for example from the Department of Health or the NHS, before handling food.

It is particularly important to wash your hands before touching ready-to-eat food, after going to the toilet, after touching raw meat or surfaces that might have come into contact with staff handling raw food.

Separate handwashing basins with hot water, liquid soap and drying facilities must be made available. The use of non-hand-operable taps is recommended, but if they are not available, taps should be turned off using a paper towel.

Single-use towels or air driers are recommended for drying hands hygienically.

Anti-bacterial hand gels should not be used instead of thorough handwashing.

Handling food

Minimising direct contact with food will reduce the risk of harmful bacteria spreading.

Safety tips:

Use tongs and other utensils to handle food

- keep hands clean to prevent contamination of handles

Use disposable gloves

- change gloves between tasks, as well as at every break, and when they become damaged
- remember to wash hands thoroughly before putting on gloves and after taking them off
- the use of separate packs of disposable gloves for different activities
- contaminated gloves must never enter a clean area used for handling or storing ready-to-eat foods

Wear clean clothing or disposable aprons

- change outer clothing (e.g. aprons and overalls) before handling ready-to-eat food or entering a clean area
- wash hands after changing contaminated clothing and before putting on clean clothing