

Fatal Food: How to Protect Your Family

The threat of deadly illness from contaminated hamburger is not over, experts warn. There are precautions you need to take now.

by PAMELA WEINTRAUB AND MARK TEICH

In June 1992, after she suddenly developed wracking stomach problems, 3-year-old Lois Joy Galler was brought from her Freeport, Long Island, home to nearby Schneider Children's Hospital for testing and treatment. But even when she didn't improve and had to be admitted on the third day of her illness, her parents, Robert and Laurie, were still convinced she had a fleeting intestinal virus. So they were shocked when Howard Trachtman, M.D., a kidney specialist, came to her room.

Lois Joy's tests had revealed *E. coli* 0157:H7, a toxic bacterium that sometimes comes from contaminated (and undercooked) ground beef and can lead to a devastating kidney disease called hemolytic uremic syndrome, or HUS. While HUS can occur in healthy adults, Dr. Trachtman explained, it is most common in children, the elderly, and adults with weakened immune systems. With HUS, a toxin produced by the bacteria ravages the body, step by step. At first it attacks the digestive tract, triggering vomiting, stomach cramps, and bloody diarrhea, as it had in Lois Joy. If the illness progresses, it damages the cells that line blood vessels, destroys platelets, and disrupts blood flow to vital organs. In the final stages, the toxin often causes acute kidney failure and sometimes brain damage. There is no cure. In most patients, Dr. Trachtman explained, the toxin eventually passes out of the body and the body heals itself. But in some it's simply unstoppable.

The Gallers were in shock. "You mean she could die?" they asked, grasping the danger for the first time.

Within days Lois Joy went into kidney failure. Despite aggressive dialysis, the fluids overflowed into her lungs, and she needed a respirator to breathe. The last words she said to her heartbroken parents before losing consciousness were "Get my car seat. I want to go home."

But Lois Joy never went home. The *E. coli* toxin injured her pancreas, inducing diabetes. Finally, a stroke left her

brain-dead, and life-sustaining equipment was removed. Eighteen days after her struggle began, Lois Joy died in her parents' arms.

A SILENT EPIDEMIC

For months after, Bob Galler tried to meet with meat industry representatives and government health authorities to alert them to the dangers of the devastating disease that killed his little girl. But he had little success.

What finally thrust HUS into the public eye, in January 1993, was a stunning national tragedy. Contaminated, undercooked ground beef served in Jack-in-the-Box restaurants in the Seattle, Washington, area and three other western states infected some 600 people in the space of a few weeks, killing three children. Smaller outbreaks in a dozen other states, from Texas to Pennsylvania to Maine, have subsequently infected hundreds of others and caused six more deaths. Seventeen-month-old Riley Detwiler, one of the Seattle-area children who died, had not even eaten the ground beef. While playing at his day-care center, he'd come in contact with another child who'd eaten at Jack-in-the-Box and contracted a mild form of infection from the *E. coli*, but this child recovered completely.

Such person-to-person transmission is especially likely in day-care centers and between siblings. In about 25 to 30 percent of HUS cases, there's another family member with the illness, says HUS researcher Elaine Orrbine, associate director of the Canadian Pediatric Kidney Disease Research Center.

Since the Seattle tragedy, startling (*continued on page 136*)

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details have emerged about just how widespread HUS is. Cases of HUS have been recognized around the United States since the 1950s, and today, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, up to 20,000 people are stricken with E. coli infection each year, which makes it our most serious food-borne public health problem. Of these 20,000, 2 to 7 percent develop HUS. (The source for about half the outbreaks in the past decade has been beef, but raw milk is often to blame too.) Nearly a fifth of the victims need hospitalization, and it's estimated that about 100 die each year, most of them young children. Many more wind up with permanent kidney damage. Scores of victims around the country require kidney dialysis because of the disease, and some have survived only through kidney transplants.

"HUS strikes quickly—attacking children who'd been perfectly healthy till then," says Bernard S. Kaplan, M.D., director of the division of nephrology at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and director and vice president of the medical board of the Lois Joy Galler Foundation—the organization Bob Galler founded to bring the disease to national attention.

WHY DIDN'T SOMEONE WARN US?

For all the misery it caused, HUS was virtually unknown to the public before the Jack-in-the-Box catastrophe. Frequently it was not even reported, so that when an outbreak occurred, the public never learned about it. Bob Galler discovered this after an appearance on the local news, when he received a call from a couple who lost their 20-month-old son to HUS in August 1992, a month after Lois Joy's death. The Gallers also heard from the parents of a 23-month-old girl who died from the disease just two weeks after the boy.

The two other families lived within a few miles of each other in New Jersey—so close they'd learned of each other through a florist who supplied flowers to mourners attending both children's funerals. Neither couple was able to trace their child's poisoning to a specific source, but it crossed their

minds that there might be a local epidemic of bad beef.

If so, no one knew about it, since these HUS cases weren't reported to health authorities, despite the fact that New Jersey required it. Even now, only five states require that they be reported. If HUS cases were registered, experts believe, outbreaks would be spotted earlier and contaminated meat sources traced in time to avoid additional cases of HUS.

THE GOVERNMENT GOOF

Frightened by the potential for more tragedies, public health officials have launched nationwide investiga-

tions into the cause of outbreaks. Their findings reveal that the problem often begins with sloppy procedures and filthy conditions in meat packaging plants. During slaughter, the intestinal fluid or feces of infected cattle may drip onto the surface of the meat, contaminating it with E. coli 0157:H7 bacteria or other sources of disease. In many instances large membranes containing the stomach and intestines have been carelessly broken, spewing toxic juices on handling surfaces and meat. When this happens, meat packagers are supposed to stop their machinery, clean up the mess, and dispose of

BEFORE YOU EAT BEEF

You can still enjoy ground beef without fear of E. coli poisoning, "as long as you handle it with the utmost care through every stage of preparation," says kidney researcher Elaine Orrbine. Similar precautions apply for lamb, pork, and poultry; although no E. coli illness has been traced to these, the bacteria have been found on samples in stores. Here, safety advice from Orrbine and the USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline.

AT THE STORE

- If you buy ground beef, pick it up just before checking out, so it's out of refrigeration for the least amount of time possible. Make sure the package feels cold and has no tears. Check the "sell-by" date to get the freshest package possible.
- Immediately seal the package in a separate plastic bag so its juices can't drip on and contaminate other foods in the cart.
- Don't buy raw (unpasteurized) milk.

AT HOME

- Refrigerate meat promptly (and make sure your refrigerator is set at 40 degrees), then use it within two days. Otherwise, freeze it; ground beef will keep its quality for up to four months if frozen at zero degrees.
- Wash fruits and vegetables, in case meat juices spilled on them or they were handled by a store employee who'd been in contact with contaminated meat.
- Defrost in the refrigerator, not on the kitchen counter. E. coli lie dormant in frozen meat, but can begin to grow again at room temperature. You can use your microwave for defrosting, but only if you're plan-

ning to cook the meat immediately.

- When preparing ground beef, keep it away from other foods to avoid contaminating them. After making patties, use hot soapy water to wash your hands and all plates, utensils, counters, and cutting boards that have touched the beef. Never reuse any packaging materials that contained the raw beef.
- Don't let children eat rare or even medium-rare ground beef (and think twice before you eat it that way yourself). Cook until the juices turn from pink to clear and the center turns gray; at restaurants, order burgers medium or well-done.
- Never partially grill extra hamburgers for later use. Continue cooking until the burgers are completely done to make sure bacteria are destroyed.
- Use a clean platter, not the one that held the raw beef, to serve.
- Toss any cooked burgers left out for more than two hours. If refrigerated promptly, cooked ground beef can keep for three to four days or can be frozen for up to three months.
- To avoid person-to-person transmission, make sure all family members wash their hands with hot soapy water after going to the bathroom. Check that your children's schools and day-care centers are careful about this too; germs can be passed from an infected child to a toy, then to the next child who touches that toy and puts his fingers in his mouth.

For further information call the USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline at (800) 535-4555.

any potentially contaminated material. However, some just pass the meat on through.

Until recent months the situation was made worse by a shortage of federal inspectors. Public health inspections by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) are supposed to review slaughtering and packaging sites on a regular basis, but because of understaffing it's likely that the stringent standards were not always met. In 1993 Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy asked Congress for the money to hire 200 additional meat inspectors. He has also instituted a series of unannounced inspections designed to get the worst offenders to clean up or be shut down. In addition, scientists are working on ways to better detect bacteria in meat—or to prevent it altogether.

Despite recent progress, critics argue that the USDA's ties to farmers and ranchers limit its ability to police our meat supply. Instead, say some like Vice President Al Gore, inspections should be handled by a consumer-oriented agency, such as the Food and Drug Administration. Another proposal calls for an entirely new agency to oversee inspection:

that plan would also set a minimum mandatory cooking temperature for restaurants.

But for now E. coli bacteria will continue to make their way into the beef that reaches the stores. Therefore it will still be up to families to protect themselves, something that should be made easier by the safe

after the injunction was placed on the labeling, two children in Texas died from HUS.

NEW TREATMENTS

Progress has also been made in treating E. coli-related disease. "We have learned that we can help save lives by starting kidney dialysis and specialized

A federal judge's ruling delayed safe-handling labels on meat. A week later two Texas children died from the disease.

preparation, cooking, and storing labels now appearing on raw meat and poultry packages.

Incredibly, even that simple safety step was delayed when U.S. District Judge James Nowlin, in Austin, Texas, agreed with three grocery-industry plaintiffs that the USDA hadn't followed proper federal procedure in allowing enough time for public comment on the labels. Since E. coli poisoning was so isolated, the judge ruled, permitting more time would not result in harm. One week

nutrition right away," says Ellis Avner, M.D., the kidney specialist who treated most of the young patients at Children's Hospital and Medical Center in Seattle. And research on HUS is now going on, he adds, that will hopefully lead to breakthroughs in the near future.

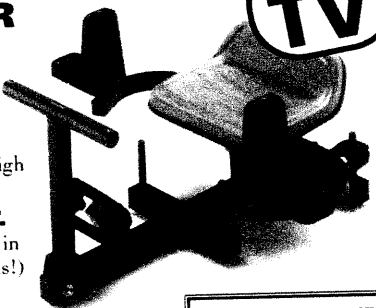
It's also hoped that with tighter government controls, there won't be many more children needing such treatment. Until that time, though, it will be up to parents to protect them. □

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