



E. COLI O157 INFECTION

The first cases of infection with *E. coli* O157 were recognised in America in 1982. It is thus a relatively new bacterium and was not a recognised risk during the childhood of many of today's parents and teachers. It does, however, now present a significant risk: the number of cases is not large (approximately 250 cases are diagnosed each year in Scotland) but infection can be severe and may result in permanent kidney damage or death. Infection can result from ingesting a very small number of bacteria and young children (and the elderly) are at particular risk of serious complications.

Outbreaks of *E. coli* O157 infection are often the result of consumption of food contaminated with the bacteria and major outbreaks, such as that in West Lothian in 1994 associated with a dairy and the outbreak in 1996/97 associated with a Wishaw butcher's shop, have attracted widespread media attention. However, research has shown that in most cases not associated with such significant outbreaks infection is acquired directly from infected animals or from the environment where such animals have been. Studies have shown that many sheep, cattle and other animals carry and excrete *E. coli* O157 bacteria. The animals themselves do not develop any evidence of ill health, but are a risk to human contacts.

It is widely recognised that visits to working or open farms are an important and enjoyable aspect of education for primary school children. Such visits should be encouraged, but must be planned and supervised in a way which identifies and minimises any risk to children, including the risk of acquiring *E. coli* O157 infection. Appropriate action includes relatively simple but effective measures. This pack contains a range of materials produced by the Health and Safety Executive, NHS Health Scotland and the Royal Highland Education Trust. Attention to the information and advice which contained will enable children to enjoy, and benefit from, safe visits to farms.