Enterohaemorrhagic *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7
Prevalence in meat and vegetables sold in Benin City, Nigeria

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Food samples made up of three meat types of 72 samples each of fresh meat from abattoir and open traditional market and “ready to eat” grilled meat (*suya*) and three vegetable types consisting of 72 each of cabbage, lettuce and tomatoes all totaling 432 samples, were screened to determine the presence of *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7 in these food items sold in Benin City, Nigeria. Of the total food samples analyzed *E. coli* was isolated from 365(84.45%) out of which 10(2.32%) had *E. coli* 0157:H7. 72(100%) each of the abattoir and open traditional market samples had *E. coli*, while 41(56.9%) *suya* samples had *E. coli* isolated from them. Of these, 5(6.94%) abattoir samples, 2(2.78) open traditional market and 3(4.17%) *suya* samples had *E. coli* isolated from them. The cabbage, lettuce and tomatoes had 48(66.67%), 68(94.99%) and 64(88.8%) samples with *E. coli* respectively. *E. coli* 0157:H7 was not detected in any of the vegetable samples. Most significant of the result is the finding that *E. coli* 0157:H7 is present in meat sold in Benin City, Nigeria and especially in the “ready to eat” grilled meat (*suya*) which is consumed directly without further processing. There is therefore the need for health authorities to put in place measures to prevent possible *E. coli* 0157:H7 outbreak.

Key words: *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7, meat, vegetables, suya.

INTRODUCTION

*Escherichia coli* 0157, which is a strain of the enterohaemorrhagic *E. coli* group, is recognized as an organism whose presence in any food material can lead to serious disease outbreak (Anonymous, 1999). The growth of this strain in the human intestine is known to produce large quantity of toxins, which can cause severe damage to the lining of the intestine and other organs of the body (Nataro and Kaper, 1998). These toxins are very similar to the toxins produced by *Shigella dysenteriae* (Paton and Paton, 1998; Perna et al., 1998). The organism is particularly associated with the development of hemolytic uremic syndrome, known to result in a mortality rate of 2 - 10% (Law, 2000). The potentially high mortality associated with *E. coli* 0157 infection, therefore make its presence in any food material worrisome and of serious public health concern as most of the outbreaks recorded has been traced to consumption of beef contaminated with the *E. coli* 0157:H7 strain (Hussein, 2007) and Vegetables such as lettuce (Hilborn et al., 1999).

In spite of the wide knowledge of the organism and its interaction, there seem to be no report on the prevalence of the organism in Africa and particularly Nigeria. In the light of these prevailing circumstances, and an increased reported cases of *E. coli* 0157 infection outbreak worldwide (Anonymous, 2002), it becomes apparent that a thorough study be conducted in this part of the world to ascertain its presence in our food products. This study is aimed at determining the prevalence of *E. coli* 0157 in meat and vegetables sold in Benin City, Nigeria, since consumption of food contaminated with the organism can result in serious disease outbreak and even death.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Collection of Samples

Samples of three different types of beef meat namely, fresh meat from abattoir, fresh meat from open traditional market and “ready to eat” grilled meat (*suya*) and three different types of vegetables namely, cabbage, lettuce and tomatoes, were collected randomly.
Sampling and screening was done between April, 2006 and February, 2007. Samples were collected in duplicates in sterile plastic containers, labeled and transported to the laboratory for immediate analysis. All the samples were screened initially for E. coli from which all positive isolates were further screened for E. coli 0157:H7.

### Isolation and identification of E. coli isolates

Each of the food samples was homogenized in a sterile mortar and 1 g of the homogenate food sample was suspended in 9 ml buffered peptone water. Serial dilutions of up to 10^-7 were then made and 1 ml of each was plated on Eosin methylene blue (EMB) agar. They were then incubated at 37°C for 24 h. Pure cultures of all colonies exhibiting typical dark to purple red colonies with metallic sheen which is characteristic of E. coli on EMB were then made in readiness for biochemical tests. Biochemical tests to confirm E. coli was done using the API 20E test strips and in accordance with the method described by Holt et al. (1994).

### Identification of E. coli 0157:H7

Pure cultures of all positive E. coli were cultured on cefixim tellurite sorbitol-MacConkey (CT-SMAC) agar using the recommended method of Vernozy-Rozand (1997) and incubated at 37°C for 18 - 24 h. Suspected colonies of E. coli 0157:H7 were confirmed using slide agglutination test with E. coli 0157: H7 antiserum manufactured by DIFCO Laboratories, Michigan U.S.A.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

E. coli, which are normal flora of the human and animal intestine, have been identified as a leading cause of food borne illness all over the world. E. coli (Agbeyegbe and Uraih, 1982) and the E. coli 0157: H7 strain (Anonymous, 1993; Hussein, 2007) strain has previously been isolated from meat samples and has also been implicated in the contamination of vegetables such as lettuce (Hilborn et al., 1999). E. coli 0157: H7 strain was detected in some of the meat samples screened in this study but was not found in any of the vegetable samples examined.

Overall, E. coli and E. coli 0157: H7 prevalence rates (Table 1) were 85.65 and 4.63% respectively, with the fresh meat samples from abattoir and traditional open market each, recording 100% E. coli prevalence. Fresh meat from abattoir had the highest E. coli 0157: H7 prevalence (6.94%) while market samples had the lowest (2.78%). This result is consistent with the work of Agbeyegbe and Uraih (1982), whose study showed high prevalence rate of E. coli in raw meat samples. The result is also in agreement with the work of Hussein (2007), who recorded E. coli 0157: H7 prevalence rates in the range of 3 to 19.7% for beef cattle. These results are indication of the poor sanitary environment under which the animals are slaughtered and sold. These animals were slaughtered on the abattoir floor that is not properly disinfected after every kill, with butchers and retailers walking between carcasses as they transact their business, while those in the market are displayed on tables in the open for sale. Nkanga and Uraih (1981) reported that meat is frequently found to be contaminated due to poor sanitary environment during slaughter, transportation and usage and through handling.

The vegetable samples had an overall E. coli prevalence rate of 83.33% with lettuce recording the highest prevalence rate of 94.44% (Table 2). E. coli is a normal inhabitant of the gut and has been isolated on several occasions from animal and human faeces (Agbonlahor and Odugbemi, 1982; Montenegro et al., 1990; Sayah et al., 2005). It has been observed that most of the vegetables in Nigeria are grown with irrigated water that are in contact with grazing cattle and this can be a source of contamination (Solomon et al., 2002). Another likely source of contamination with this organism is the vehicles on which the vegetables are transported to the various sales point. It has also been observed that vegetables are transported using the same vehicles used in transporting cattle from the north to the southern parts of the country with the cow dung as likely source of contamination.

Although studies have shown that E. coli 0157:H7 could contaminate vegetables, especially through irrigation water and other sources such as soil (Solomon et al., 2002), this study did not detect the serotype out of all the

### Table 1. Prevalence rates of E. coli and E. coli 0157:H7 in meat samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meat</th>
<th>No of samples analyzed</th>
<th>No. with E. coli</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No. with E. coli 0157:H7</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No. of E. coli isolates</th>
<th>No. Identified as E. coli 0157:H7</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Meat (Abattoir)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Meat (Open Market)</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suya</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>85.65</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*% = percentages based on No. of samples analyzed
all the *E. coli* isolated from all the vegetable samples screened (Table 2). This is in spite of the very high *E. coli* prevalence (83.33%) recorded among the vegetable samples. This findings lend credence to the findings of Johnson et al. (1996), who reported that humans are exposed more to non-0157 shiga-toxin *E. coli* (STEC) from food and environmental sources considerably more often than *E. coli* 0157, yet the incidence of non-0157 STEC infection is far lower than that of *E. coli* 0157.

Most significant of this study is the fact that *E. coli* 0157:H7 was isolated from “ready to eat” grilled meat (*suya*). *E. coli* 0157:H7 prevalence rate on the basis of number of sample analyzed showed that *suya* recorded 4.17 and 3.09% on the basis of the number of sample analyzed showed that the organism was isolated were those obtained from hawkers who carry the product around and sell in trays especially to travelers in motor parks (bus station), without re-heating them in open fire as it is the practice with sale of *suya* in *suya* stands. Storage of food at room temperature and preparing food too long before consumption allow organism such as *E. coli* and *salmonella* to multiply and reach critical levels and have been identified as the most common cause of food poisoning (Adam and Mass, 1999). Contamination by these organisms therefore could be as a result of improper handling of the *suya* after preparation and most especially from vectors like flies and hands of the sellers themselves. Enabulele et al. (1989) isolated *E. coli* and *Staphylococcus aureus* from the hands of 57.5 and 47.5% respectively of food handlers in Benin City.

Conclusively it is to be noted that with the low level of sanitary practices observed and lack of adequate data on infections outbreak in Nigeria the organism could spread easily without early detection and as such it is important to take seriously the isolation of the organism in food materials from this study. Consequent upon this, it is recommended that consumers cook their meat properly before they are consumed and also avoid indiscriminate eating of meat sold in the open that is not properly reheated. Fruits and vegetables should be washed properly using appropriate food grade anti-microbial preparations and should not be carried in the same containers used for fresh meat to avoid cross contamination with the organism.

**REFERENCES**


**Table 2.** Prevalence rates of *E. coli* and *E. coli* 0157:H7 in vegetable samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vegetable</th>
<th>No of samples analyzed</th>
<th>No with <em>E. coli</em></th>
<th><em>%</em></th>
<th>No with <em>E. coli</em> 0157:H7</th>
<th><em>%</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabbage</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lettuce</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>94.44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomatoes</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>88.89</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>83.33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*% = percentages based on No. of samples analyzed

