STUDY NOTES · BASIC CONCEPT

What Is Biological Warfare? Can E.Coli be used in such warfares?

International Relations

25 Dec 2020

What Is Biological Warfare? Can E.Coli be used in such warfares?

Biological warfare (biowarfare) is the deliberate use of viruses, bacteria, or toxins to cause illness or death in humans, animals, or crops during conflict. It targets health, food supplies, or infrastructure.

Examples of potential biowarfare agents include:

- Anthrax
- Plague
- Smallpox
- Botulinum toxin
- Tularemia

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Biowarfare is banned globally under the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).

Can E. coli Be Used for Biological Warfare?

Most E. coli strains are NOT dangerous. Over 90% of Escherichia coli (E. coli) strains are harmless and naturally exist in the human gut.

But some E. coli strains ARE dangerous. Certain strains like E. coli O157:H7 produce Shiga toxin, which can cause:

- Severe diarrhea
- Kidney failure
- Hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS)
- Death in extreme cases
- These strains are monitored internationally.

Could E. coli Be Used in Biowarfare?

Theoretically, yes — but practically, it is difficult and unlikely.

E. coli could be weaponized if:

- A highly toxic strain is modified or concentrated
- It is dispersed through food, water, or aerosols
- It is engineered to carry harmful genes
- Some E. coli strains are used in biological research because they are easy to genetically modify.
- This is why unauthorized transport of E. coli into another country is taken very seriously.

But E. coli is not considered a top battlefield bioweapon like anthrax or plague because:

- It dies quickly outside a host
- It spreads unpredictably
- It is harder to control as a weapon
- Many strains cause mild or no illness

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Why the FBI Case Is Serious?

Even if the smuggled E. coli strain is not weapon-grade:

- Importing biological material without proper approval is illegal
- It poses risks to public health, agriculture, and labs
- It raises concerns about biosecurity, research ethics, and misuse
- It can involve genetically modified organisms (GMOs)
- It violates the U.S. Federal Select Agent Program rules
- Sometimes such cases are linked to worries about biological espionage—the unauthorized movement of organisms, samples, or research data across borders.

Real-World Risks of E. coli Misuse

E. coli could be misused in three ways:

1. Food Contamination

Deliberate contamination of:

Water supplies

Dairy products

Meat processing facilities

2. Laboratory Genetic Modification

Engineering E. coli to:

Carry toxin-producing genes

Deliver harmful payloads (synthetic biology)

3. Agricultural Disruption

Targeting livestock or crop research labs.

Because of such risks, countries enforce strict biosafety laws.

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