

Fact Sheet

Cholera



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What is Cholera



Cholera is an acute, diarrheal illness caused by infection of the intestine with the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. An estimated 3-5 million cases and over 100,000 deaths occur each year around the world. The infection is often mild or without symptoms, but can sometimes be severe.

How is it Spread?

A person may get cholera by drinking water or eating food contaminated with the cholera bacterium. In an epidemic, the source of the contamination is usually the feces of an infected person. The disease can spread rapidly in areas with inadequate treatment of sewage and drinking water.

The cholera bacterium may also live in the environment in brackish rivers and coastal waters. Shellfish eaten raw have been a source of cholera and a few persons in the United States have contracted cholera after eating raw or undercooked shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico. The disease is not likely to spread directly from one person to another; therefore, casual contact with an infected person is not a risk for becoming ill.

Signs and Symptoms

Most people exposed to the cholera bacterium don't become ill and never know they've been infected. Only about 1 in 10 infected people develop the typical signs and symptoms of cholera, usually within a few days of infection.

Symptoms of cholera may include:

- Profuse watery diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Rapid heart rate
- Loss of skin elasticity
- Dry mucous membranes
- Low blood pressure
- Thirst
- Muscle cramps
- Restlessness or irritability

Persons with severe cholera can develop acute renal failure, severe electrolyte imbalances and coma. If untreated, severe dehydration can rapidly lead to shock and death.

Treatment

Cholera can be simply and successfully treated by immediate replacement of the fluid and salts lost through diarrhea. Patients can be treated with oral re-hydration solution. Less than 1% of cholera patients die.

Antibiotics shorten the course and diminish the severity of the illness, but they are not as important as re-hydration. Persons who develop severe diarrhea and vomiting in countries where cholera occurs should seek medical attention promptly.

Prevention

The risk for cholera is very low for people visiting areas with epidemic cholera. When simple precautions are observed, contracting the disease is unlikely.

All travelers to areas where cholera has occurred should observe the following:

- Drink only water that you have boiled or properly treated with chlorine or iodine. Other safe beverages include tea and coffee made with boiled water and carbonated bottled beverages with no ice.
- Eat only foods that have been thoroughly cooked and are still hot, or fruit that you have peeled yourself.
- Avoid undercooked or raw fish or shellfish.
- Make sure all vegetables are cooked, avoid salads.
- Avoid foods and beverages from street vendors.
- Do not bring perishable seafood back to the United States.

**A simple rule of thumb is
“Boil it, cook it, peel it, or
forget it.”**



For more sources of information on this topic visit:

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT www.scchealth.co

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES www.michigan.gov/mdhhs

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION www.cdc.gov