



GENERAL INFORMATION on CHOLERA

WHAT IS CHOLERA?

Cholera is an acute, diarrheal illness caused by infection of the intestine with the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. An estimated three to five 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. Approximately one in 20 (five percent) infected persons will have severe disease characterized by profuse watery diarrhea, vomiting and leg cramps. In these people, rapid loss of body fluids leads to dehydration and shock. Without treatment, death can occur within hours.

WHERE IS CHOLERA FOUND?

The cholera bacterium is usually found in water or food sources contaminated by feces (poop) from a person infected with cholera. Cholera is most likely to be found and spread in places with inadequate water treatment, poor sanitation and inadequate hygiene.

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 U.S. have contracted cholera after eating raw or undercooked shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico.

HOW DOES A PERSON GET CHOLERA?

A person can 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 contaminating water and/or food. The disease can spread rapidly in areas with inadequate treatment of sewage and drinking water. The disease is not likely to spread directly from one person to another; therefore, casual contact with an infected person is not a risk factor for becoming ill.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CHOLERA?

Cholera infection is often mild or without symptoms, but can sometimes be severe. Approximately one in 20 (five percent) infected persons will have severe disease characterized by profuse watery diarrhea, vomiting and leg cramps. In these people, rapid loss of body fluids leads to dehydration and shock. Without treatment, death can occur within hours.

HOW LONG AFTER INFECTION DO THE SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

It can take anywhere from a few hours to five days for symptoms to appear after infection. Symptoms typically appear in two to three days.

WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO GET CHOLERA?

Individuals living in places with inadequate water treatment, poor sanitation and inadequate hygiene are at a greater risk for cholera.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE CHOLERA?

If you think you may have cholera, seek medical attention immediately. Dehydration can be rapid, so fluid replacement is essential.

HOW IS CHOLERA DIAGNOSED?

To test for cholera, doctors must take a stool sample or a rectal swab and send it to a laboratory to look for the cholera bacterium.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR CHOLERA?

Cholera can be simply and successfully treated by immediate replacement of the fluid and salts lost through diarrhea. Patients can be treated with an oral rehydration solution, a prepackaged mixture of sugar and salts to be mixed with water and drunk in large amounts. This solution is used throughout the world to treat diarrhea. Severe cases also require intravenous fluid replacement. With prompt rehydration, fewer than one percent of cholera patients die.

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

SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT GETTING CHOLERA FROM OTHERS?

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.

WHAT IS THE RISK FOR CHOLERA IN THE UNITED STATES?

In the U.S., cholera was prevalent in the 1800s, but water-related spread has been eliminated by modern water and sewage treatment systems.

If you have additional questions, call your nearest facility:

Biloxi Facility: (228) 523-5000

Toll free: (800) 296-8872

Mobile OPC: (251) 219-3900

Toll free: (888) 201-0110

JACC/Pensacola: (850) 912-2000

Toll free: (866) 927-1420

Eglin OPC: (850) 609-2600

Toll free: (866) 520-7359

Panama City OPC: (850) 636-7000

Toll free: (888) 231-5047

This information is from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It can be found at www.cdc.gov/cholera/general. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is providing this for veterans, their families and VA staff.