

Cholera

Frequently Asked Questions

What is cholera?

Cholera (call-er-ah) is a disease that affects the intestines. It is caused by a bacterium called *Vibrio cholerae*. Cholera has been very rare in the United States, but it is still common in other parts of the world that have poor water treatment and sewer systems. Although cholera can be life-threatening, it is easily prevented and treated. Everyone, especially travelers, should know how the disease is spread and what can be done to prevent it.

Who gets cholera?

Anyone can get cholera. Those who may be most at risk are travelers to foreign countries where the disease is an ongoing problem and where drinking water is untreated or sewage treatment is poor.

How is cholera spread?

A person may get cholera by drinking water or eating food contaminated with cholera bacteria. The bacteria grow in the intestines and are passed out of the body through the stool. Spread of cholera can be rapid in areas with poor treatment of sewage and drinking water. Cholera bacteria may also live in warm coastal waters. Eating raw shellfish that live in contaminated water has been a source of cholera. A few people in the United States have gotten cholera by eating raw or undercooked shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

People with cholera may have no symptoms at all. Cholera does not usually cause a fever. Symptoms of cholera may include:

- Diarrhea (mild to severe)
- Vomiting
- Dehydration (loss of water from the body)
- Leg cramps

Symptoms usually start 2 to 3 days after swallowing the bacteria. However, symptoms may begin as early as 5 hours, or up to 5 days, after swallowing the bacteria.

Hospital care is needed in severe cases when people have lost a lot of fluid from their bodies. Death can result if untreated.

How is cholera diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects cholera, a sample of the patient's stool and blood will be examined.

What is the treatment for cholera?

Cholera can be simply and successfully treated by replacing fluids and salts lost by severe vomiting or diarrhea. Fluids can be replaced by drinking a special solution or in severe cases through the use of an IV to deliver fluids directly into a vein.

Antibiotics can be used to shorten the length of the disease. About 25-50% of cholera cases are fatal if left untreated, but with prompt fluid replacement, less than 1% of cholera patients die. (NOTE – it is very important to finish your antibiotics, even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

Can people with cholera pass the illness to others?

The disease is not likely to spread from person to person. There is no need to avoid casual contact with an infected person. However, an infected person can spread cholera to others as long as the cholera bacteria are being passed in his/her stool. The bacteria usually disappear from the stool a few days after the diarrhea and vomiting have stopped. Sometimes, a person may be able to pass the bacteria in his or her stool for several months after symptoms have ended.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

People with cholera should stay home from work or school until the vomiting and diarrhea have ended. It is not necessary to exclude a person from work or school who has recently recovered from cholera and may still have cholera bacteria in his/her stool. Casual contact with an infected person is generally not a risk for becoming ill. People who are recently recovered must wash their hands after every use of the bathroom to avoid spreading the bacteria to others.

Is there a vaccine for cholera?

There is no vaccine against cholera currently available in the United States. Cholera vaccine is not recommended for travelers.

How can cholera be prevented?

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before preparing food, before eating, and before feeding children.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after changing diapers and using the toilet.
- Anyone who has diarrhea should not prepare food for others.
- Make sure that all bodily wastes are properly discarded. This includes the washing or disposal of soiled diapers.
- Avoid drinking untreated water.
- Avoid eating raw or undercooked fish and shellfish.
- When traveling to areas where there is cholera, a basic rule to follow is: "Boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it."

Where can I get more information?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- The NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/cholera

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.