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Disease Spotlight: CHOLERA



What is cholera?

Cholera is an acute, **diarrheal illness** caused by infection of the intestine with the **bacterium *Vibrio cholerae***. It has a short incubation period of 1-5 days, and produces an enterotoxin that causes watery diarrhea that can lead to **dehydration** and death if not treated promptly.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

Although the bacterium is present in the feces of infected persons for up to 2 weeks, most people infected with *V. cholerae* **do not become ill**. However, approximately 1 in 20 infected persons has severe illness, characterized by copious, painless, **watery diarrhea, vomiting, and leg cramps**. In these persons, rapid loss of water due to diarrhea leads to dehydration and shock. Without treatment, death can occur within hours.

How does a person get cholera?

V. cholerae is part of the normal flora of brackish water and estuaries. A person may get cholera from **drinking water or eating food, such as raw shellfish, which has been contaminated by the bacterium**. The disease can spread rapidly in areas with inadequate treatment of sewage and drinking water, but is **not likely to spread from one person to another**.

What is the risk for cholera in the United States?

Cholera has been virtually **eliminated in the US** due to modern sewage and water treatment systems. The biggest risk for contracting a *V. cholerae* infection is **travel to parts of Asia, Africa, or Latin America**, where a cholera epidemic is occurring.

How is cholera treated?

The most important treatment is simple and **immediate rehydration** of fluids lost through diarrhea. Patients can be treated with oral rehydration solution, a prepackaged mixture of sugar and salts to be mixed with water and drunk in large amounts. With proper rehydration, fewer than 1% of cholera patients die.

What can a traveler do to reduce the risk of cholera?

- Only drink water that has been **boiled or properly treated** with chloride or iodine.
- Eat only foods that have **been thoroughly cooked and are still hot**, or fruit you have **peeled** yourself.
- Avoid undercooked or **raw seafood** or shellfish.
- Avoid **raw vegetables** and food or beverages bought from **street vendors**.
- A simple rule: **“Boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it.”**

Source:

For more information on cholera, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/index.htm> or <http://www.who.int/inf-fs/en/fact107.html>