



CHOLERA

What is cholera?

Cholera is an acute, diarrheal illness caused by infection of the intestine (gut) with the toxigenic bacterium *Vibrio cholerae* serogroup O1 or O139. An estimated 1.3 to 4 million people around the world get cholera each year and 21,000 to 143,000 people die from it. People who get cholera often have mild symptoms or no symptoms, but cholera can be severe.

Who gets cholera?

Persons living in places with unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation, and inadequate hygiene are at the highest risk for cholera.

How is cholera spread?

The cholera bacterium is usually found in water or in foods that have been contaminated by feces (stools) from a person infected with cholera bacteria. Cholera is most likely to occur and spread in places with inadequate water treatment, poor sanitation, and inadequate hygiene.

Cholera bacteria can also live in the environment in brackish rivers and coastal waters. Shellfish eaten raw have been a source of infection. Rarely, people in the U.S. have contracted cholera after eating raw or undercooked shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

Approximately one in 10 people who get sick with cholera will develop severe symptoms such as watery diarrhea (loose stools), 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 soon do symptoms appear?

It usually takes two to three days for symptoms to appear after a person ingests cholera bacteria, but the time can range from a few hours to five days.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

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.



Frequently Asked Questions

What is the treatment for cholera?

Cholera can be simply and successfully treated by immediate replacement of the fluid and salts lost through diarrhea (loose stools). Patients can be treated with oral rehydration solution (ORS), a prepackaged mixture of sugar and salts that is mixed with one liter of 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 appropriate rehydration, fewer than 1% of cholera patients die.

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

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of cholera?

The single most important preventive measure is to avoid consuming uncooked foods or water in foreign countries where cholera occurs unless they are known to be safe or have been properly treated (for example, sealed bottled, boiled, or chemically treated water). In addition, it is important to wash your hands often with soap and clean water or an alcohol-based hand cleanser, particularly before you eat or prepare foods and after using the bathroom.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/cholera/index.html>