

CHOLERA Q&A

What is cholera?

Cholera is an infection of the intestine caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. Between 1817 and 1911, six worldwide cholera outbreaks resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. The bacterium responsible for the seventh pandemic, now in progress, is known as *V. cholerae* O1, biotype El Tor. Only a few cases of cholera are recognized in the United States each year, primarily among travelers to developing nations.

Who gets cholera?

United States residents who may be at risk include people traveling to foreign countries where outbreaks are occurring, and people who consume raw or undercooked seafood from warm coastal waters. In the U.S., cholera was prevalent in the 1800's but has been virtually eliminated by modern sewage and water treatment.

How is cholera spread?

A person may get cholera by drinking water or eating food contaminated with the cholera bacterium, usually introduced through the feces of an infected person. The cholera bacterium may also live in the environment in brackish rivers and coastal waters. Shellfish eaten raw or undercooked have been a source of cholera.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

The infection can be without symptoms or with mild symptoms, but sometimes it can be severe. Severe disease is characterized by profuse watery diarrhea which may be accompanied by vomiting and leg cramps. Without treatment, rapid loss of body fluids can lead to dehydration and shock with death occurring within hours. With prompt rehydration, less than 1% of cholera patients die.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms usually appear 2-3 days after exposure, but may occasionally occur in as little as a few hours or as long as five days after exposure.

When and for how long is a person able to spread cholera?

As long as their stool contains the bacteria that cause cholera. The cholera bacteria are generally present in the stool as long as the patient has diarrhea and for several days after the diarrhea has stopped. Antibiotics can shorten the period of communicability. Occasionally, a carrier state may persist for several months.

What is the treatment for cholera?

Most cases of cholera can be treated simply by giving a solution of oral rehydration salts, a pre-packaged mixture of sugar and salts to be mixed with water and drunk in large amounts. During an epidemic, 80-90% of diarrhea patients can be treated by oral rehydration alone, but patients who become severely dehydrated must be given intravenous fluids. In severe cases, an effective antibiotic can reduce the volume and duration of diarrhea and the period that bacteria are excreted. Tetracycline is the usual antibiotic of choice, but resistance to it is increasing.

How can cholera be prevented?

“Boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it!” Travelers visiting places where cholera has occurred should take the following precautions:

- Drink only boiled or bottled water. Other safe drinks include tea and coffee made with boiled water and carbonated, bottled beverages with no ice.
- Eat only thoroughly cooked foods that are still hot.
- Peel fruits and raw vegetables yourself. Do not eat the peelings.
- Avoid undercooked or raw fish or shellfish.
- Eat only cooked vegetables and avoid salads.
- Avoid foods and beverages from street vendors.

Persons with diarrhea and those caring for them should wash their hands regularly and thoroughly. Ill persons should not prepare foods or beverages for others.

Where can I get additional information about cholera?

Contact the Georgia Division of Public Health, Epidemiology Branch, by email at gaepinfo@dhr.state.ga.us. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention maintain a telephone line where callers can receive recent information on cholera and other diseases of concern to travelers. The number is 877-FYI-TRIP (394-8747). The following websites may also be helpful:

- CDC travel information – <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/>
- CDC cholera – http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/cholera_g.htm
- WHO cholera – <http://www.who.int/health-topics/cholera.htm>

