

Cholera

What is cholera?

Cholera is a severe diarrheal illness caused by two strains of the bacteria *Vibrio cholerae*, serogroup O1 and O139. Cholera became rare in the U. S. after modern sewage and water treatment systems became common. However, people who travel to areas with poor public sanitation or water treatment may be at risk of getting cholera.

There are other strains of *Vibrio cholerae* that can cause disease, but they cause much milder diarrhea or wound infections. These bacteria are called non-O1/O139 *Vibrio cholerae*. They live in fresh or salt water and can cause disease when water with the bacteria gets into an open wound, or after eating raw or undercooked seafood.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

The symptoms can range from very mild to severe diarrhea, vomiting, and dehydration. Fever is usually absent. A person with cholera may not even have any symptoms at all. A small percent of people with cholera (about 1 in 20) have severe symptoms such as profuse, watery diarrhea, vomiting, and leg cramps. These people are at risk of quickly becoming dehydrated or going into shock or kidney failure unless they are treated quickly.

How is cholera spread?

A person can get cholera by drinking water or eating food contaminated with *Vibrio cholerae*. In countries with poor public sanitation and water treatment, travelers are at a greater risk, because the cholera germs are found in the food or water systems. People with cholera can also spread it by not washing their hands after using the bathroom, then handling foods such as raw fruit or vegetables that are eaten by others. A person can also become infected with cholera by eating tainted shellfish such as clams or oysters, including those from the Gulf of Mexico. Cholera is not easily spread from one person to another, so casual contact with an infected person is not a risk for becoming ill.

How soon after infection do symptoms occur?

Symptoms can occur within a few hours to 5 days after exposure, usually within 2 to 3 days.

Should people sick with cholera stay home from work, school, or day care?

If a person is a food handler, or works in a day care center, or has direct contact with ill persons or the elderly, they must not work while they have diarrhea. Children with diarrhea should not attend a day care center. People with cholera will be instructed by a public health nurse about returning to work in jobs that involve food preparation, ill or elderly people or in a child care setting.

What is the treatment for cholera?

Providing fluids to stop dehydration is the most important treatment. Antibiotics may be needed to shorten the length of the disease and reduce the amount of time a person sheds the bacteria in their stool.

When traveling outside of the U. S., what should be done to prevent cholera?

The most important way to protect yourself is to avoid eating uncooked foods or drinking water when visiting countries where cholera occurs, unless you have confirmed that the food or water is safe

or has been properly treated. Other steps to take to reduce exposure to cholera are:

1. Avoid eating raw or undercooked fish or shellfish.
2. Only eat foods that have been fully cooked and are still hot, or fruit that you have peeled yourself.
3. Make sure all vegetables are cooked.
4. Avoid foods and beverages from street vendors.
5. Avoid drinking untreated water. Drink only water that you have boiled or treated with chlorine or iodine. Other safe beverages include tea and coffee made with boiled water, and bottled beverages with no ice.
6. A simple rule of thumb for eating and drinking is “Boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it.”
7. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after going to the bathroom and before preparing or eating meals.
8. Do not bring fresh seafood back to the U. S.

Where can a traveler get more information about cholera?

Early in the trip planning process, obtain current information based on the countries or regions that will be visited. Travelers can ask their healthcare provider, or an international travel clinic for more information. Travelers can also find information about cholera and other diseases by visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention travelers’ health website at www.cdc.gov/travel/.