

Frequently Asked Questions

Cholera



What is cholera?

Cholera is an acute, diarrheal illness caused by infection of the intestine with the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. The infection is often mild or without symptoms, but can sometimes be severe. Severe cases are characterized by profuse watery diarrhea, vomiting, and leg cramps. Rapid loss of body fluids leads to dehydration and shock. Without treatment, death can occur within hours.

Where is cholera found?

The cholera bacterium is usually found in water or food sources that have been contaminated by feces from a person infected with cholera. Cholera is most likely to be found and spread in places with inadequate water treatment, poor sanitation, and inadequate hygiene.

How does a person get cholera?

A person can get cholera by drinking water or eating food contaminated with the cholera bacterium. In an epidemic, the source of the contamination is usually the feces of an infected person that contaminates water and/or food. The disease can spread rapidly in areas with inadequate treatment of sewage and drinking water. The disease is not likely to spread directly from one person to another; therefore, casual contact with an infected person is not a risk for becoming ill.

What are the symptoms?

- Abdominal pain
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Severe or watery diarrhea
- Dehydration
- Lethargy
- Muscle cramps
- Water-electrolyte imbalance
- Shock and seizure may occur in severe cases

Diarrhea due to cholera often has a pale, milky appearance that resembles water in which rice has been rinsed (rice-water stool).

Diarrhea dehydration signs and symptoms include:

- Irritability
- Lethargy
- Sunken eyes
- Dry mouth
- Extreme thirst
- Dry and shriveled skin that's slow to bounce back when pinched into a fold
- Little or no urine output
- Low blood pressure
- Irregular heartbeat

In general, children and adults show the same signs and symptoms, but children are particularly susceptible to low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) due to fluid loss, which may cause an altered state of consciousness, seizures, and coma.

How long after infection do the symptoms appear?

It can take anywhere from a few hours to 5 days for symptoms to appear after infection but symptoms typically appear in 2-3 days.

What should I do if I think a family member or I have cholera?

Seek medical attention immediately. Dehydration can be rapid so fluid replacement is essential. If you have oral rehydration solution (ORS), the ill person should start taking it now; it can save a life. He or she should continue to drink ORS at home and during traveling to get treatment. If you have an infant who has watery diarrhea, continue to breastfeed.

Diagnosis

To test for cholera, doctors must take a stool sample or a rectal swab and send it to a laboratory to look for the cholera bacterium.

Treatment

Cholera can be simply and successfully treated by immediate replacement of the fluid and salts 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. Severe cases require intravenous fluid replacement.

Antibiotics shorten the course and diminish the severity of the illness, but they are not as important as receiving rehydration. Antibiotics include:

- Ciprofloxacin (Cipro, Cetraxal, Ciloxan and Proquin)
- Doxycycline (Doryx, Oracea, Atridox, Monodox, Vibra-Tabs, Morgidox,
- Azithromycin (Zithromax, AzaSite, and Zmax)

Prevention

- Drink only bottled, boiled, or chemically treated water and bottled or canned carbonated beverages. Make sure the seal has not been broken on bottled drinks.
- Avoid tap water, fountain drinks, and ice cubes.
- Wash your hands in hot, soapy water; wash before eating or preparing food and after using the restroom. Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) when clean water and soap isn't available.
- Do not consume ice and use bottled water to brush your teeth, do not allow water in your mouth from the shower.
- Eat foods that are packaged or that are freshly cooked and served hot. Do not eat raw or undercooked meats and seafood or unpeeled fruits and vegetables.
- Choose hot foods; avoid food that is stored or served at room temperature. Avoid street vendors.

Resources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/cholera/general/> <https://www.gstatic.com/healthricherkp/pdf/cholera.pdf>

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/cholera/basics/symptoms/con-20031469>