
Cholera

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is cholera?

Cholera is a diarrhoeal disease caused by a bacterium called *Vibrio cholerae*. It is able to cause large outbreaks and epidemics. Cholera outbreaks usually occur in the developing world and are associated with poor water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructures.

2. How does cholera affect a person?

The incubation period (the period from when the person ingests cholera-contaminated water/food to when they first become ill) ranges from a few hours to 5 days (usually 2 - 3 days). Most persons infected with cholera will have very mild illness or not feel ill at all. Mild cholera presents as a diarrhoeal illness which can't easily be distinguished from other common causes of diarrhoea. In its severe form, cholera typically presents as follows:

- sudden onset of illness
- diarrhoea which is profuse, painless and watery, with flecks of mucus in the stool ("rice water" stools)
- vomiting may occur, usually early in the illness
- most persons don't have fever, although children may develop a fever
- dehydration occurs rapidly and if untreated can be fatal

3. Who is at risk of getting cholera?

The people most at risk of contracting cholera are those who do not have access to piped safe water and improved sanitation.

4. How is cholera spread?

Water contaminated with human faeces is the most important means of cholera transmission, either directly (through drinking contaminated water) or indirectly (through eating contaminated food).

Note the following:

- Water can be contaminated at its source, during storage or during use
- Food can become contaminated when it comes into contact with contaminated water. Vegetables that have been fertilised with human excreta (nightsoil) or "freshened" with contaminated water also become contaminated. Fish (particularly shellfish) sourced from contaminated water and eaten raw or insufficiently cooked may also cause infection
- Soiled hands can also contaminate clean drinking water and food

5. How is cholera treated?

Rehydration (replacement of lost body fluid) is the mainstay of treatment and is lifesaving. Mild cases of cholera can be managed outside the hospital with oral rehydration. Moderate and severely ill persons need to be admitted to hospital for intravenous fluid rehydration.

Antibiotics are recommended for patients with moderate or severe dehydration.

6. How do we prevent the spread of cholera?

In an outbreak, the best control measures are the early detection of cases and treatment of patients, coupled with health education. Hand washing is essential for all healthcare workers as well as the community. To respond quickly to a cholera outbreak and prevent deaths, health facilities must have access to adequate quantities of essential supplies, particularly oral rehydration solution and intravenous fluids.

Provision of potable (treated) water and improved sanitation, as well as health education are necessary to prevent the spread of cholera in the community.

Cholera vaccines are also used in outbreak situations.

7. What precautions should people take?

The community should be informed about sources of contamination and ways to avoid infection. Hand washing is vital in all community and health facility settings. Attention to sanitation can markedly reduce the risk of transmission of cholera as well as other diarrhoeal diseases. This is especially true where lack of improved sanitation may lead to

contamination of water sources. High priority should be given to observing the basic principles of sanitary human waste disposal and particularly the protection of water sources from faecal contamination.

- Use safe water. If people are concerned about the quality of water they use for drinking and cooking, it is recommended to treat the water first by boiling it (place water in a clean container and bring to a boil for 1 minute) or treating it with household bleach (add 1 teaspoon of household bleach (containing 3 to 5% chlorine concentration) to 20 litres of water, mix well and leave it to stand for at least 30 minutes before use). Water should be stored covered in clean containers.
- Because contaminated food may also be a source of cholera infection, attention to food safety is an essential preventive measure in order to prevent faecal contamination of food by food handlers. Street vendors and communal food sources will require particular attention through health education, since they pose a special risk.