

Cholera

Fact sheet

Cholera is often found in countries where there is poor access to clean drinking water and sanitation. Drinking or eating water or food contaminated with cholera can give you severe diarrhoea or vomiting.

What is cholera?

Cholera is a severe illness caused by the cholera bacteria, *Vibrio cholerae*.

In countries that have poor access to clean drinking water and sanitation, the bacteria can be found in drinking water, uncooked seafood and other foods.

Drinking or eating this food and water can cause severe diarrhoea and sometimes vomiting.

Almost all cases in Australia are in people who were infected while overseas.

Very rarely cases occur in Australia in people who eat contaminated imported food, or raw seafood from coastal rivers especially in northern NSW and Queensland.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

Symptoms of cholera include:

- sudden severe, watery diarrhoea
- vomiting

Some people don't have any symptoms or only have mild diarrhoea, particularly in children.

Symptoms begin within a few hours to up to five days after being infected with the bacteria.

If not treated, cholera can be fatal. It is important to speak to a doctor as soon as you have symptoms.

How is cholera spread?

Cholera is normally spread through:

- drinking contaminated water
- eating raw or undercooked seafood from contaminated waters, or
- eating other contaminated foods.

Who is at risk of cholera?

People who travel to countries with poor access to clean drinking water and sanitation are most at risk of getting cholera.

How is cholera prevented?

When going to countries where cholera is found:

- only drink bottled or treated water and do not have ice in drinks
- do not eat uncooked vegetables and fruit. Only eat fruit that you can peel yourself (for example, bananas and oranges)
- avoid raw or under cooked seafood
- avoid food and drinks from street vendors
- only eat cooked foods that are served hot
- cover food so that flies cannot land on it
- wash hands with soap and running water before meals and after using the toilet

If you have cholera, to protect others:

- Ensure you maintain good hygiene. Wash your hands with soap and running water for at least 20 seconds after using the toilet
- do not prepare food for others
- If you work with food and drinks, do not attend work until your doctor has said you no longer can spread cholera to others. The doctor will test your faeces (poo).

If you have eaten or shared the same food or drink as someone who has tested positive for cholera and you develop symptoms you should see a doctor and get tested.

How is cholera diagnosed?

A doctor will run a test on a faeces sample (poo) to confirm that you have cholera.

How is cholera treated?

If not treated, cholera can be fatal. It is important to speak to a doctor as soon as you have symptoms.

Diarrhoea and vomiting can cause severe dehydration. It is very important that people who develop severe diarrhoea and vomiting seek medical attention immediately.

Cholera is treated with an oral rehydration solution. This involves drinking large amounts of a water solution with sugar and salt in it.

Severe cases may need these fluids to be given through a needle or tube. If patients are given lots of fluids, fewer than 1% of cholera patients die.

Antibiotics can reduce the time and severity of the illness, but rehydration is the most important.

What is the public health response?

Laboratories and hospitals must let the local public health unit know about cholera cases, under the Public Health Act 2010. Public health units investigate cases to identify possible sources of infection and to prevent spread.

For further information please call your local public health unit on 1300 066 055.