

Cholera

Cholera is a disease that causes severe diarrhoea and dehydration. Left untreated cholera can be fatal, even in previously healthy people. It can be easily treated though by giving people enough fluids to replace those they have lost.

You are more at risk of cholera when visiting countries with poor sewerage and water treatment facilities. It is very rare in New Zealand. People with cholera in New Zealand have usually caught the disease while travelling overseas, often in Asia.

How it spreads

People who have cholera can pass the bacteria out of their body in their poo (faeces). If you then eat food, drink water or touch things contaminated with bacteria from the infected poo you can become infected too.

In developing countries, common causes of infection include:

- eating shellfish collected from areas contaminated by raw sewage
- eating contaminated foods, such as rice, seafood, fresh vegetables and fruit
- drinking unsafe water from rivers, ponds, lakes, tanks or bores

It is very rare for cholera to be passed from person to person.

Symptoms

Most people who are infected with cholera do not become ill. Around one in ten people develop serious symptoms, usually within a few days of being infected.

Symptoms may include:

- diarrhoea (runny poo), often very watery
- feeling or being sick
- muscle cramps
- collapsing or faints
- dehydration (when your body doesn't have enough fluids or salts)

The dehydration can lead to tiredness, sunken eyes, dry mouth, extreme thirst, dry and shrivelled skin and little or no urine (wee), which may cause you to collapse or faint.

People who do not have symptoms can still pass on the disease to others. This can occur if they do not wash their hands properly and handle food or water that other people eat or drink.

If you have symptoms

- Contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.
- Your doctor may request a faeces sample for testing.
- Testing is the only way to confirm what illness you have.

Treatment

Cholera is an easily treatable disease. Most people can get better by taking on fluids to replace those they have lost.

Restrictions

If you have cholera you are at risk of passing on the disease to others.

You should stay home from work, school or daycare until you have been free of diarrhoea symptoms for at least 48 hours (2 days).

Children at day care and people who work in high risk professions (such as food preparation, health care or day care centre employees) need to carry out further tests before they can return to work. Once they have recovered, they are required to carry out two tests, at least 48 hours apart.

This is to check they are not infectious anymore, and reduces the risk of them passing on cholera to others who could become very unwell.

If you have cholera people you live with or have travelled with may also need to carry out testing and stay home.

It's important to practice good hand hygiene to reduce the risk of passing on cholera to others. You and others in your house should wash hands with soapy water for 20 seconds, then dry well with a clean cloth or paper towel every time:

- after going to the toilet
- before preparing food, eating or drinking
- after changing babies nappies

Travel advice

If you're travelling to a region with cholera you can reduce your risk by following simple precautions.

A vaccine is available that can prevent you from getting cholera while overseas. You can pay to get the vaccine from your GP or a travel clinic.

You can also reduce your risk by being careful with the food you eat and what you drink.

Food safety

- Eat foods that are packaged or that are freshly cooked and served hot.
- Do not eat raw and undercooked meats and seafood, and avoid unpeeled fruits and vegetables.
- If you have symptoms, avoid preparing food for other people.

Safe drinking water

- Drink only bottled, boiled, or chemically treated water. Bottled or canned carbonated drinks are also safe. Make sure that the seal has not been broken on bottled drinks.
- Disinfect your own water by bringing it to a full boil.
- Avoid tap water, drinking fountains, and ice cubes in drinks.
- Use bottled, boiled, or chemically treated water to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash and prepare food, or make ice.

For more advice on staying safe when travelling abroad visit www.safetravel.govt.nz.

For more information

For more information visit:
www.arphs.nz/cholera

If you are concerned about cholera call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse.