

# CHOLERA FACT SHEET

## What is cholera?

Cholera is an illness caused by infection with the bacteria *Vibrio cholerae*. In the United States there are less than 6 persons diagnosed with cholera each year.

## Who can get cholera?

Anyone. Persons who live in places with inadequate water treatment, poor sanitation, and inadequate hygiene are more likely to get cholera. Although this illness is rare in the United States, it still occurs in many places in the world, including Africa, Southeast Asia, and Haiti.

## How does a person get cholera?

The bacteria are usually found in water or food sources that have been contaminated by feces (poop) from a person infected with cholera. A person can get cholera by consuming contaminated water or food. Cholera can spread rapidly in areas with inadequate treatment of sewage and drinking water. It is not likely to spread directly from one person to another; therefore, casual contact with an infected person does not put you at risk for becoming ill.

## What are the symptoms of cholera?

Cholera is often mild or without symptoms, but can sometimes be severe. Approximately one in ten (5-10%) infected persons will have severe disease characterized by significant watery diarrhea, vomiting, and leg cramps. The rapid loss of body fluids leads to dehydration and shock. Without treatment, death can occur within hours.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms typically appear within 2–3 days. However, symptoms may begin anywhere from a few hours to 5 days after becoming infected.

## Is there a vaccine to prevent cholera?

No. Currently, cholera vaccines are not available in the United States.

## How is cholera treated?

Cholera is treated by immediately replacing 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. With rapid rehydration, less than 1% of cholera patients die. Antibiotics reduce the time you are ill and the severity of your illness, but they are not as important as receiving rehydration. Persons who develop severe diarrhea and vomiting in countries where cholera occurs should seek medical attention promptly.

## How can cholera be prevented?

Cholera can be prevented by taking the following precautions when you travel to areas where cholera is occurring or has occurred:

- Only drink bottled, boiled, or chemically treated water and bottled or canned carbonated beverages.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds.
- Only eat foods that are freshly cooked and served hot.
- Cook food thoroughly (particularly seafood).
- Avoid raw vegetables and fruits that cannot be peeled. Only eat fruits and vegetables you have peeled yourself.

## Where can I get more information?

Information about cholera and other related health topics can be found at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit [www.doh.dc.gov](http://www.doh.dc.gov) or call (202) 442-9371.