

Cholera

The disease

Cholera is a diarrheal disease caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. The incubation period is usually 1 to 3 days but can range from several hours to 5 days.

Causes

- Eating contaminated water and food
- Bathing in contaminated water
- Washing cooking utensils in contaminated water
- Eating moist grains, rice, millet or sorghum, served at room temperature
- Eating raw or undercooked seafood
- Eating raw fruits and vegetables

Symptoms

Symptoms usually last two to three days, can last in some for up to five days. Up to 75% of people infected have no symptoms at all. Twenty percent (20%) develop diarrheal illness. Between 2%-5% of infected people develop severe watery diarrhea, vomiting and dehydration.

Symptomatic cholera usually begins with profuse, watery diarrhea without fever or abdominal cramps. The stool typically becomes clear and flecked with white mucus, known as “rice-water” stool. Vomiting, which can be severe, and painful leg cramps are common symptoms.

Severely ill cholera patients can lose up to 10% of their body weight in diarrhea and vomitus.

Risk

In the United States, cholera was prevalent in the 1800s but has been virtually eliminated by modern sewage and water treatment systems. However, as a result of improved transportation, more persons from the United States travel to parts of Latin America, Africa, or Asia where cholera outbreaks are occurring.

When cholera occurs in an unprepared community, case-fatality rates may be as high as 50% - usually because there are no facilities for treatment, or because treatment is given too late. In contrast, a well-organized response in a country with a well established diarrheal disease control program can limit the case-fatality rate to less than 1%.

Treatment

May consist of rehydration therapy and antibiotics (given to severely dehydrated patients to shorten the period of infection).