

Vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE) – Fact sheet

What are vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE)?

Enterococci are bacteria (or germs) that are naturally present in the human bowel (gut), female genital tract and are often found in the environment. Vancomycin is an antibiotic that is often used to treat infections caused by enterococci; however, some strains of enterococci have become resistant to Vancomycin and these are called VRE.

Who is at risk of VRE colonisation/infection?

If you are in hospital you are more at risk of infection as your normal body defence mechanisms may be weakened by illness, surgery, drugs and/or procedures. In general, healthy people do not usually get VRE infections and with adherence to appropriate hand cleaning (hand hygiene) the risk is minimised. Clean hands protect you and others from lots of infections, not just VRE.

VRE can live on or in the body without causing symptoms or disease (often called colonisation). However, sometimes it can cause infections of the urinary tract, the bloodstream, or of wounds associated with catheters or surgical procedures. VRE infection means the bacteria is causing symptoms/illness.

How is VRE spread?

VRE is spread by direct or indirect contact with hands, environmental surfaces or medical equipment that has been contaminated with VRE. VRE is not spread through the air by coughing or sneezing.

Can VRE be treated?

People who are colonised with VRE do not need treatment but will still need to be isolated while in hospital. Most VRE infections can be treated with a few antibiotics other than vancomycin.

To prevent the spread of VRE while in hospital

Early detection through screening (testing) can prevent spread in hospital. Ask staff if you would like to know more information.

In addition to the usual hygiene practices, such as staff regularly cleaning their hands, VRE spread can be prevented by:

- Placing you in a single room with your own ensuite
- Placing a sign on your door to alert staff to take special precautions. For further information please read our fact sheet – ‘Why am I in Isolation?’
- Staff wearing gowns and gloves when they care for you
- Placing an alert on your file – this is to alert staff to take extra precautions
- Asking visitors to clean their hands and wear gowns and gloves

You can help prevent the spread of VRE while in hospital by:

- Never sharing towels, face cloths, eating utensils, personal items e.g. toothbrushes
- Always cleaning your hands before eating and after using the toilet
- Cleaning your hands before leaving your room. Ask staff if you would like more information

- Asking visitors to clean their hands before and after visiting you

- Not allowing your visitors to use your bathroom or sit/lie on your bed
- Expecting all healthcare workers to clean their hands before and after contact with you
- Asking questions of your healthcare team so you can understand about VRE

If you are required to leave your room clean your hands before leaving your room. Wounds or invasive devices must be securely covered to ensure there is no leakage of any body fluids. Ask staff if you would like more information

You can help prevent the spread of VRE when at home by:

- Cleaning your hands before preparing/eating food, after using the toilet, touching any wound or medical device
- As far as usual household cleaning goes no additional measures are required
- Taking antibiotics only as prescribed
- Informing doctors or healthcare providers that you have VRE and following their instructions
- Unless instructed otherwise by your doctor, do all your normal activities paying particular attention to hand hygiene

Will I always have VRE?

While infections may be treated, people who are colonised with VRE may carry this in the bowel for many years. In some people, VRE bacteria disappear from the bowel over time and these people are said to have cleared their own VRE or 'decolonised'.

Where can I get more information?

This fact sheet is a quick guide only. If you have further questions please ask your doctor or nurse for assistance. They will be able to help you search the information you require.

You can also visit the Ministry of Health website for more information:

<http://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/guidelines-for-control-of-multidrug-resistant-organisms-dec07.pdf>

Acknowledgements

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