Fact Sheet

Cholera

What is cholera?
Cholera is a bacterial disease that affects the intestinal tract.

How is cholera spread?
The cholera bacteria are passed in feces. Generally, people are infected by eating or drinking food or water contaminated by fecal waste. This occurs most often in underdeveloped countries lacking adequate water supplies and proper sewage disposal. Infection can also occur by eating raw or undercooked seafood from polluted waters. Problems can also arise when foods are contaminated by dirty water, feces, soiled hands, or flies.

The disease is not likely to spread from one person to another; therefore casual contact with an infected person is not a risk for becoming ill with cholera.

How common is cholera?
Cholera is rare in the United States but more common in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The biggest risk for contracting cholera occurs when people travel in those continents.

What are the symptoms of cholera?
Symptoms usually appear two to three days after exposure and include sudden onset of severe watery diarrhea, occasional vomiting and cramping, and dehydration. In severe untreated cases, death may occur.

What is the treatment for cholera?
Due to the rapid dehydration that may result from severe diarrhea, replacement of fluids by mouth or intravenously is critical. Antibiotics may also be prescribed to shorten the duration of diarrhea and shedding of bacteria in the stool.

How can cholera be prevented?
At the present time, the cholera vaccine is no longer available in the United States. It is not recommended for travelers because of the brief and incomplete immunity it offers.

When traveling, follow basic precautions:
- Drink only bottled water, carbonated water, or boiled water.
- If tap water is the only source, boil or treat water with chlorine.
- Avoid drinks with ice that may have been made with untreated water.
- Avoid uncooked vegetables or fruit. Fruit with intact peels that you can peel yourself are safe (e.g., bananas and oranges).
- Avoid raw and undercooked meats, particularly seafood.
- Eat only cooked foods that are served hot.
After cooking or boiling food and water, protect against contamination by flies.
Avoid food and drinks from street vendors.
Pay attention to personal hygiene, especially washing hands with soap and water before meals.

How do I get more information on cholera?
Van Buren/Cass District Health Department
(269) 621-3143

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Web Site: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_cholera.htm

This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor’s orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.