

Vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE)

Frequently Asked Questions

What are enterococci and VRE?

Enterococci are a type of bacteria that normally live in our bowel without causing any illness. Sometimes, in people who have serious illnesses associated with an immune deficiency such as kidney disease or cancer, enterococci can enter other parts of the body and cause an infection. The most common sites of infection with enterococci are the urinary tract, wounds, or heart (endocarditis). In seriously ill patients the organism can cause infection of the blood (sepsis).

Vancomycin is an antibiotic usually used to treat infections caused by enterococci. Some enterococci have become resistant to vancomycin and these are known as VRE. Infections caused by VRE are harder to treat because of the limited antibiotic options.

How did I get VRE?

The development of VRE is generally associated with long term use of multiple antibiotics in hospital, especially those in intensive care and other specialised units where people are usually sicker and require intensive medical treatment. Most people who have VRE have no ill effects; this is called colonisation. Some studies show that it may also be possible to pick up VRE in the community through the food supply.

How is VRE spread?

In hospital VRE are usually spread from person to person through direct contact (usually via the hands) with a person who is infected or colonised or by contact with contaminated shared facilities such as toilets and frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, taps and benches. It is therefore important that people who are known to carry VRE are placed under special precautions when admitted to certain high risk patient care areas of the hospital.

What does it mean to have VRE?

People may not know that they are carrying VRE and may never develop an infection. However, if people who are colonised with VRE have an operation or a medical device inserted such as an intravenous drip or wound drain, they become at risk of getting an infection. Treatment choices are then limited because of the resistance to the usual antibiotics used to treat the infection. Even though it is carried in the bowel, VRE is not a cause of diarrhoea.

What happens when I am in hospital?

Patients who are admitted to high risk patient areas may be required to be tested. You may be asked to obtain a faeces sample; this is the most accurate method of diagnosing VRE carriage. Or, if you are not able to provide a faeces sample, a rectal swab is a very simple and quick procedure where a cotton-tipped swab is inserted into the anus, rotated once, and then withdrawn. The whole procedure takes only a few seconds and is not uncomfortable.

If you are found to have VRE you may be cared for in a single room and health care staff will wear gloves and a gown when caring for you. You will be asked to regularly wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub, and to stay in your room whenever possible unless you need to be transferred for special tests or treatment. Hospital staff will advise you if different instructions are necessary.

What about family and visitors when I am in hospital?

It is quite safe for family and friends to visit you whilst in hospital. However, it is strongly advised that visitors wash their hands after visiting you. Hand washing is the most important way to prevent the spread of VRE (and other infectious diseases such as the flu and gastro).

If visitors or family help you with care such as assistance with dressing or showering then they may be asked to wear gloves and gowns.

How can I prevent the spread of VRE when I go home?

To prevent the spread of VRE to other people when you are at home, it is important that you follow these precautions:

- > Wash your hands with soap and water and dry thoroughly after going to the toilet or before preparing food.
- > Keep wounds, cuts and abrasions clean and covered until healed.
- > Keep surfaces such as benchtops, bathrooms and toilets clean.
- > Use your own towels and face cloths. Do not share these items with other people.
- > Make sure you follow instructions and advice provided by your doctor or healthcare provider on how to care for wounds or manage medical devices.

No special requirements are needed for your clothing and towels, eating utensils and dishes. They can be washed in the normal way using detergent or laundry powder. Extra disinfectant is not needed.

You do not have to tell anyone (other than health professionals) of your VRE status.

What should I do if I have to go into hospital or receive health care in the community?

You should always inform the health care worker that you have had a VRE infection or colonisation in the past. This will assist them to ensure that they provide the appropriate care for you. This may mean being allocated a single room and having some swabs taken to see if you still have VRE.

How long am I likely to carry VRE?

The period of carriage of VRE in the bowel varies a great deal and depends on several factors, such as your overall health and whether you need to continue taking antibiotics for any reason. Because of this, you may be re-screened when admitted to hospital again in the future to see if you are still carrying the resistant strain.

Where can I find more information on VRE?

You can speak with your Doctor or Health Professional or access more information from the following SA Health web page:

- > Infection prevention and control: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/hospitalinfections

For more information

Infection Control Service
Communicable Disease Control Branch
11 Hindmarsh Square
Adelaide SA 5000
Telephone: 1300 232 272
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au

Public -I1-A2



*SA Health Safety and Quality Community Advisory Group



www.ausgoal.gov.au/creative-commons



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