



VANCOMYCIN-RESISTANT ENTEROCOCCI (VRE) Information for Patients and Visitors

What is VRE?

Enterococci are bacteria (germs) that live in the bowel of all people and very rarely cause infections. However, some patients in hospital have medical problems that make it harder for them to fight infections. Therefore, they have a greater chance of getting an infection with these bacteria.

Vancomycin is an antibiotic that is used to treat serious infections with bacteria that are resistant to more common antibiotics like penicillin. In hospital we rely on Vancomycin to treat many kinds of infections that cannot be treated with other kinds of antibiotics. Until recently we were confident that Vancomycin would always be an effective treatment.

Vancomycin-Resistant Enterococci (VRE) are the first common bacteria to be resistant to Vancomycin and their presence in the hospital increases the possibility of infection occurring for which there are very few effective antibiotics.

How does a bacterium become resistant?

One thing is clear – the more antibiotics are used, the more antibiotic resistant bacteria there will be. In North America antibiotics have been prescribed very readily and public demand is high. They are used in large quantities in farm animals to promote growth and increase profits. Many bacteria that infect humans are becoming resistant to a variety of antibiotics. We all need to be part of an effort to reduce unnecessary antibiotic use – the root of the problem.

How is VRE spread?

VRE is spread by direct contact with a person who has VRE. Because it is a bowel organism, it commonly contaminates the environment of patients, especially those with diarrhea or difficulty in controlling their bowels. Hands of patients and caregivers become contaminated and are the main means by which the bacteria are spread.

Are certain people at risk of getting VRE?

People who have been previously treated with many antibiotics especially vancomycin are at risk of developing VRE.

Do all people with VRE get sick?

No. Most people who acquire it only carry it in their bowel and never become sick.

Why all the concern?

Enterococci are readily transmitted from person to person by direct contact and VRE can rapidly become a common bacteria in hospital. If this happens patients entering hospital will have a high likelihood of contacting VRE and carrying it in their bowel. If they are one of the few who gets a serious infection with enterococci, there could be limited treatment options. By isolating people known to have VRE in their bowels, we can limit the spread and, hopefully, stop VRE from becoming a common hospital bacterium.

What infections do enterococci cause?

Enterococci most commonly cause urinary tract infections.

How can we stop the spread?

Isolation of patients known to have VRE and strict attention to hygiene has been shown to reduce the spread. Specific measures include:

- Private rooms or sharing of rooms among patients with VRE
- Frequent handwashing by patients
- Handwashing by all persons before entering the room
- Gloves and gowns for all people who provide direct patient care
- Removal of gowns and gloves within the room and handwashing before leaving
- Equipment, e.g. blood pressure cuffs, should not be shared among patients
- Frequent and thorough cleaning of the environment

What will happen when I leave the hospital?

VRE is not a problem outside of hospital and poses no risk for friends and family. If a patient is transferred to another health care facility, the receiving institution will be informed.

Does VRE ever go away?

Yes, but it is difficult to predict when it will occur. Some people will carry it for many years.

ALWAYS REMEMBER....

- As some people may remain carriers of this germ, we should take precautions during any further visits to health care facilities
- Your history of VRE will be noted in your health record
- If you go to another doctor or hospital please tell them you were on Contact Precautions for VRE

Source: Provincial Infection Control (PIC-NL)

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