

# Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci (VRE)

## What is VRE?

Enterococci are common bacteria that are normally found in the bowel. There are many different types of enterococci and they rarely cause illness in healthy people. Vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE) are a type of enterococci which has become resistant to an antibiotic called vancomycin. Vancomycin is a powerful antibiotic used to treat serious infections.

## How do you get VRE?

VRE are found in stool and are transmitted from one person to another by direct contact (unwashed hands) or indirect contact (touching surfaces contaminated with the organism). VRE are hardy organisms that can survive outside the body on environmental surfaces such as toilet seats and door knobs. A surface does not have to be visibly soiled to be contaminated – VRE bacteria are invisible to the naked eye. You get VRE when you touch your mouth or eat with contaminated hands; the bacteria are swallowed and then may live in your digestive tract. VRE are not spread through the air.

## What if I am colonized with VRE?

If you are colonized with VRE it means the organism lives in your bowel without causing any illness. Most people who are colonized with VRE will not become sick from it and your body will get rid of the organism on its own with time. People who are colonized with VRE can potentially contaminate the environment with their unwashed hands. Practicing good hygiene, especially after using the toilet, is very important.

## Who is likely to get a VRE infection?

Healthy people are usually not at risk of becoming infected with VRE. VRE can cause illnesses such as blood infections, urinary tract infections, or abscesses. This is uncommon however, and is usually only seen in those with:

- Recent hospitalization in health care facilities outside Canada
- Critical illness(es) in intensive care units
- Severe underlying disease or weakened immune systems
- Urinary catheters
- Exposure to (or contact with) a patient/resident with VRE
- Antibiotic use, particularly vancomycin

## How is VRE treated?

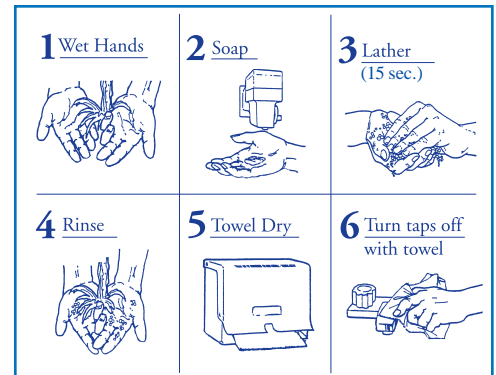
People who are colonized with VRE do not require any special medical treatment. If a person is infected with VRE, his/her physician will determine the best course of treatment. Often, more than one kind of antibiotic will be needed to kill the germ and it may take a long time before the infection is gone.

## What can be done to stop the spread of VRE?

**1. Practice good hand hygiene.** This is the most effective way to stop the spread as VRE is mainly spread by unwashed hands.

**a. Wash hands frequently for at least 15 seconds using the 6-step method, and especially:**

- After visiting the washroom
- Before handling, preparing, serving or eating food
- When hands look or feel dirty
- After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing
- When providing care to an ill person
- When visiting a hospital or long-term care home



**OR**

**b. Use a hand sanitizer** when handwashing facilities are not available and hands are not visibly soiled. When using a hand sanitizer, apply enough to wet the entire hand and rub solution into hands until completely dry.

**2. Clean the environment.** In addition to practicing good hand hygiene, thoroughly clean the person's environment (bedroom, bathroom, equipment) to prevent further spread of the organism. Use an all purpose household cleaner and follow the directions on the label.

**Be sure to:**

- Remove any visible feces (stool) **prior** to starting the cleaning process
- Always clean in the direction of **least soiled to heaviest soiled areas**
- Wet the surface well and clean using good **friction**
- Pay special attention to frequently touched surfaces and areas that may be soiled with feces such as the toilet and sink. For heavily soiled areas you may want to disinfect the area using a solution of 5 ml (1 teaspoon) of household bleach mixed with one litre of water. Apply the solution to the surface after cleaning and allow surface to air dry

**Note: No special precautions are required for handling dishes or waste**

**3. Clean Clothes/Fabric.** Wash clothes/fabric separately if they are heavily soiled with feces:

- Rinse off feces
- Clean in a hot water cycle with soap
- Dry items in the dryer on high heat if possible
- Dry clean where appropriate

For further information, please call:  
York Region Health Services Health Connection | 800-361-5653  
www.york.ca



**4. Use Antibiotics Wisely.** To limit the development of new antibiotic resistant organisms, we all have to use antibiotics properly. It is important to:

- **Finish any antibiotics prescribed for you**, even if you feel better before they are gone. If you do not take all of your antibiotics, some of the stronger bacteria will not be killed and these may develop antibiotic resistance
- **Use antibiotics only for serious bacterial infections.** Antibiotics do not kill viruses like influenza (the “flu”) and the common cold, and so you should not take antibiotics for them. By taking an antibiotic when it is not needed, you could be helping the bacteria in your body to develop resistance to that antibiotic
- **Only take antibiotics prescribed for you;** do not share them with others who have a similar illness

## Can people with VRE have visitors?

**Yes.** Restrictions on activities or visitors at home or in the community are not necessary.

- If you are visiting a person with VRE in hospital or a long-term care home, you may be asked by staff to wear gloves and gown before having contact with the person or his/her environment. This will reduce the chance of your spreading the germ to others. It is very important to perform hand hygiene after visiting these facilities. Wash your hands using the six-step method or use a hand sanitizer if hands are not visibly soiled
- When visiting health care providers in the community (doctor, nurse, physiotherapist), tell them about your VRE so they can take the appropriate precautions (e.g. handwashing, use of gloves)

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