

### **What is VRE?**

VRE stands for Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci. VRE is a type of enterococcus bacterium that has become resistant to antibiotics such as penicillin, gentamicin, and vancomycin. Such drugs are usually used to treat infections with Enterococci, but do not work for fighting infections caused by VRE.

Enterococci are bacteria that normally live in the human intestine and female genital tract. Almost everyone acquires these organisms from birth and carries them throughout their lives. It normally does not cause disease, but it can cause infections in someone whose immune system is weakened, or it can infect other parts of the body from the intestinal tract.

### **Why is VRE important?**

Fortunately, Enterococci do not cause many serious infections, especially in healthy people. When infections do occur, they can be relatively minor (i.e. urinary tract infections), or they can be life threatening, as in cases of endocarditis (infections of the heart valves). Infections due to VRE are difficult to treat because there are so few antibiotics that will kill these bacteria. Usually combinations of antibiotics must be used to treat the infections. Sometimes it is difficult to find the right combinations of drugs that will kill VRE. When this happens, infections with VRE can be serious and even life threatening.

Carrying VRE is in itself not a serious health risk. The only risk is that it may cause an infection in the future, and the infection might be difficult to treat.

### **How does someone get VRE?**

There are two main ways someone can become a carrier of VRE. (1) People who are sick and have taken antibiotics can sometimes get VRE because the antibiotics make the Enterococci in their intestine resistant, or the antibiotics kill the normal Enterococci and leave only the resistant Enterococci (VRE) to grow. (2) People can also get VRE from others who carry VRE in their stool and do not practice good hand washing habits.

### **If I get VRE, do I have it for the rest of my life?**

This is uncertain. Some people eventually grow out only normal Enterococci when their stool is cultured, but if given antibiotics, the VRE could appear again.

### **How do I help prevent the spread of VRE?**

Hand washing is the most important measure. Hands should always be washed after using the toilet, using household hand soap and water for at least 15 seconds. If you have an active infection with VRE, your caregiver should wear gloves when handling body fluids such as urine and wound drainage, and then wash hands immediately after removing gloves. Surfaces contaminated with body fluids should be cleaned with a household disinfectant.