

What is cholera?

Cholera is a bacterial disease that affects the intestinal tract. The bacterium is called *Vibrio cholerae*. Although cholera is a very rare disease today, six worldwide outbreaks were documented between 1817 and 1911 that resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. Currently, only a few cases are reported in the United States each year.

Who gets cholera?

While cholera is a rare disease, those who may be at risk include people traveling to foreign countries where outbreaks are occurring and people who consume raw or undercooked seafood from warm coastal waters subject to sewage contamination. In both instances, the risk is quite small.

How are the bacteria spread?

The cholera bacteria are passed in the stools (feces). It is spread by eating or drinking food or water contaminated by the fecal waste of an infected person. This occurs more often in underdeveloped countries lacking adequate water supplies and proper sewage disposal.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

People exposed to cholera may experience mild to severe diarrhea, vomiting and dehydration. Fever is usually absent.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear from 6 hours to 5 days after exposure, usually 2-3 days.

What is the treatment for cholera?

Because of the rapid dehydration that may result from severe diarrhea, replacement of fluids by mouth or by the intravenous route is critical. Antibiotics, such as tetracycline, are also used to shorten the duration of diarrhea and shedding of the bacteria in the stool.

Is there a vaccine for cholera?

A vaccine is available and is sometimes recommended for travelers to certain foreign countries where cholera is occurring. However, the vaccine offers only partial protection (50% effective) for a short duration (3-6 months). Some physicians feel that foreign travelers almost never contract cholera and that use of the current vaccine cannot be justified. In some foreign countries, however, it may be required as a condition of entry.

How can cholera be prevented?

The single most important preventive measure is to avoid consuming foods or water in foreign countries where cholera occurs unless they are known to be safe or have been peeled, properly cooked or treated.