

Vancomycin Resistant Enterococcus (VRE)

A Guide for Patients

Hospitality
Healing
Stewardship
Respect

Calvary Hospital Infection Control & Staff Health Department

What is VRE?

Enterococci are bacteria that live in most people's gut and are normally harmless. However, like many micro-organisms, enterococci can sometimes invade other parts of the body and cause infection.

Vancomycin is a very strong antibiotic often used to treat complicated infections when other antibiotics don't work.

When enterococci are exposed to Vancomycin, they sometimes develop ways to stop the antibiotic working and this has resulted in 'Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci' (VRE).

Who is at risk of getting VRE?

- Those who have been in hospital a number of times or for a long time e.g. Cancer or renal patients.
- People who have been treated with Vancomycin or multiple types of antibiotics.
- People who have had abdominal surgery.
- Critically ill patients like those in ICU.

Is it harmful to you?

VRE is not usually a problem for healthy people and it can live in a person's body without causing any harm. This is called being 'colonised' with VRE and is the most common situation.

On rare occasions the VRE may move to other parts of the body and cause 'infection' and make the person unwell. VRE infections can occur in wounds, urine and blood.

How do we know you have VRE?

During your stay in hospital an anal (bottom) swab, wound swab or urine sample may be collected and sent to the laboratory for VRE testing.

How is VRE spread?

The most common way VRE can be spread is through contact with someone who has VRE. VRE can spread from patient to patient when the bacteria is carried on the hands of healthcare workers if they don't perform hand hygiene properly.

It can also be spread through contact with contaminated equipment or other surfaces (e.g. bedrails, door handles, BP machines, stethoscopes etc). Surface contamination can occur when people touch objects after going to the toilet and have failed to wash their hands.

How can you prevent the spread?

Proper hand hygiene is one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of acquiring an infection, including VRE. Clean your hands thoroughly after using the bathroom, before preparing food or after contact with a person who has VRE. You can either wash with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand rub.

Ask staff and your visitors to wash their hands or use hand rub before and after they touch or visit you. VRE can live on surfaces and objects so you should regularly clean areas such as bathrooms and frequently touched surfaces in your home (e.g. door handles)

What will happen while you are in hospital?

You will be placed in a single room or in a shared room with other VRE patients. The staff need to wear a yellow gown and gloves when entering your room or bed space. This is to prevent the spread of VRE to other patients. More swabs or specimens may be collected to determine where the VRE is located. If you have an infection with VRE the doctor may treat you with antibiotics that can kill the VRE.

It is important that you remain in your room to reduce the risk of spreading the VRE bacteria. If you need to leave your room, your hands should be washed prior to leaving. It is important that you do not visit patients in the ward or in other wards in the hospital.

If you are required to visit other departments for specific tests e.g. X-ray, the staff caring for you will inform the department before you are transferred there. Staff such as wardsmen and the staff performing the procedure on you will wear a gown and gloves. If they do not, please inform them that you have VRE and that they should be taking precautions. Your room or bed space should be cleaned each day. If this doesn't occur please inform the nurse caring for you

What happens when I go home?

There is no need to do anything extra at home. Good general personal and household hygiene including hand washing is important to prevent the spread of VRE to others. Eating utensils and dishes can be washed as normal.

You can return to work when you are well and your doctor says it is OK. If you are a healthcare worker, check with Infection Control before returning to work. If you go to your GP or another healthcare facility please tell them you have had VRE.

Will the VRE go away?

Some people do get rid of their VRE. You will need to have repeated swabs / specimens collected to check if the VRE is still there. Your GP can arrange for these swabs to be attended. Consuming certain types of probiotic yoghurt or probiotic medicines can sometimes help to get rid of the VRE. Ask your doctor if these are suitable for you to take. It is necessary to have two negative swabs, collected one month apart, before you will be considered clear of VRE.

If you have any questions about VRE that have not been answered here, please ask your doctor or contact Calvary Hospital Infection Control & Staff Health Department ☎ 02 6201 6844