Vancomycin-Resistant Enterococci (VRE)

Frequently Asked Questions

What are Enterococci?

Enterococci are bacteria that normally live in the human intestine without causing any illness. Sometimes, usually in people who have serious illnesses associated with an immune deficiency (e.g. kidney dialysis or cancer patients), enterococci can invade other parts of the body and cause an infection. The most common sites of enterococcal infection are the urinary tract, wounds, septicaemia (blood) or endocarditis (heart lining).

What is "VRE"?

"VRE" stands for "vancomycin-resistant enterococci". Vancomycin is an antibiotic used to treat infections caused by enterococci. Some enterococci have become resistant to vancomycin and infections by these VRE are harder to treat because of their antibiotic resistance.

How is VRE spread?

VRE are usually spread from person-to-person by physical contact with faeces, or with skin (e.g. hands) or objects that have been contaminated with VRE. VRE may be spread by sharing toilet facilities or by contaminated hands (e.g. from people who do not wash their hands after going to the toilet) or by contaminated taps or door handles. In hospitals, VRE may be spread through contaminated equipment or from the contaminated hands of patients or staff.

Who is at risk of VRE?

People who acquire and carry VRE are usually described as being "colonised". They are not infected and are not ill from VRE. However, people with certain medical conditions have a higher risk of developing VRE infections, including those who:

- have serious illness associated with immune deficiency (e.g. kidney dialysis, transplant and cancer patients).
- have had abdominal surgery.
- have been given vancomycin or multiple antibiotics.

Are VRE dangerous?

VRE infections are dangerous for people with medical conditions (listed above) that seriously reduce the ability of their body's immune system to fight bacterial infections. Even though VRE infections in these people can be very serious, most of them will recover with appropriate antibiotic treatment. People who have a normal immune system i.e. not receiving chemotherapy, radiotherapy or dialysis and who are only colonised with VRE have a very low risk of VRE infection.

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How do you stop VRE spreading?

Hand washing is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of VRE. Thorough hand washing with soap and water for a minimum of 15 seconds after going to the toilet and before eating or preparing food is important. Using an alcohol based hand rub is just as effective as long as your hands are not visibly dirty.

Why should we control the spread of VRE?

There are only a few antibiotics that can effectively treat VRE infections. The more VRE infections we can prevent by controlling the spread of VRE, the less need there will be for more potent antibiotics, therefore there is less risk of VRE becoming resistant to these antibiotics. Also, VRE can transfer their antibiotic resistance to some other bacteria, which then makes infections by those bacteria difficult to treat.

Are any special hygiene precautions required for a person who is a contact of a person who is colonised or infected with VRE?

No special hygiene precautions are recommended for VRE contacts living in their own home. Hand washing with soap and water for a minimum of 15 seconds after going to the toilet and before eating or preparing food is sufficient. There are no recommendations to restrict contact with any other people or for additional cleaning or disinfection.

Are any special hygiene precautions required for a person who is colonised with VRE?

No special hygiene precautions are required for people colonised with VRE who are living in their own home. Hand washing with soap and water or using an alcohol based hand rub after going to the toilet and before eating or preparing food is sufficient. VRE are very hardy and can live in the environment for a long time therefore regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces (e.g. door handles, taps, bench tops) with detergent/disinfectant is important especially if you receive nursing or personal care in your home. There are no recommendations to restrict contact with any other people. These measures are extremely important if anyone in the household has a poor immune system e.g. receiving chemotherapy, radiotherapy or dialysis or if the person is incontinent of faeces, has diarrhoea or compliance with personal hygiene is poor.

What should VRE colonised or infected patients do if they require admission to hospital or to a residential care facility?

If you are colonised or infected with VRE you should notify your hospital or residential care facility staff immediately. Special precautions may be required to prevent the spread of VRE in the hospital or residential care facility.

What should a person who is a close family contact of a person who is colonised or infected with VRE do if they require admission to hospital or to a residential care facility?

If you are a close family contact of a person who is colonised or infected with VRE you should notify your hospital or residential care facility staff immediately. You may be required to provide a specimen of faeces for testing prior to your admission so that appropriate precautions to prevent the spread of VRE in the hospital or residential care facility can be put in place (in case you are colonised with VRE).

What tests are required?

Faeces or a rectal/perianal swab are usual. You may be asked to obtain a faeces sample. This is the most accurate method of diagnosing VRE carriage, or if you are not able to provide a faeces sample a rectal swab is a very simple and quick procedure, where a cotton-tipped swab (like a cotton bud for removing ear wax) is inserted into the anus, rotated once, and then withdrawn. The whole procedure takes only a few seconds and is not uncomfortable.

What happens if I am found to be infected or colonised with VRE?

If you are infected with VRE, you will be given antibiotic treatment to cure the infection and additional hygiene precautions will be required to prevent the spread of VRE in your hospital or residential care facility.

If you are colonised with VRE, you will not be given antibiotic treatment, but additional hygiene precautions may be required to prevent the spread of VRE if you are admitted to a hospital or residential care facility especially if you have symptoms of diarrhoea or have faecal incontinence.

If you are colonised with VRE and live at home, no additional hygiene precautions will be required.

Where can I get more information or advice on VRE?

You can speak with your Doctor or Health Professional or access information from the following sites:

Infection Control Service, SA Health - www.health.sa.gov.au/infectioncontrol

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USA.

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_VRE_publicFAQ.html

For more information

Infection Control Service
Communicable Disease Control Branch
Telephone: 08 8226 6363
www.health.sa.gov.au/infectioncontrol

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