

# Vancomycin Resistant Enterococcus

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## What are Enterococci?

Enterococci are bacteria that normally live in the bowel, intestines and digestive tracts of humans. The bacteria help to break down wastes in the body. It can sometimes cause urinary tract infections, wound infections and blood infections if it gets out of its normal environment.

## What is VRE?

VRE (Vancomycin Resistant Enterococcus) are enterococci that have developed a resistance gene to most antibiotics. Since enterococci are found normally in the intestines, every time an antibiotic is taken, the bacteria are exposed. Enterococci are usually resistant to many antibiotics, however some strains are resistant to almost all antibiotics. This resistance gene makes it very difficult for doctors to treat a seriously ill VRE patient.

## How is VRE spread?

Direct contact or indirect contact with contaminated objects or people

transmits VRE. VRE, is usually spread from person to person in a hospital or long term care facility on the hands of health care workers. The bacteria are also hardy outside the human body and can stay alive for hours on environmental surfaces. Touching things like bed rails, toilets, bedpans and other hand contact surfaces in the room of a positive person can contaminate the hands, Healthy people can carry VRE without ever knowing it. The people at greatest risk of acquiring a VRE infection are those undergoing hemodialysis, cancer chemotherapy and abdominal surgery. Also, people who have a history of high antibiotic use, prolonged hospitalization and the elderly are also at risk of an infection or carrying the bacteria for a long period of time. Most healthy patients will clear the bacteria once they have been discharged home.

## How is VRE spread prevented?

- Good handwashing is the best prevention. In hospital and

nursing home settings, health care providers must wash their hands between patient/resident contact.

- Hands must also be washed after contact with contaminated objects in a patient's room.
- Patients/ residents in a health care facility should be isolated from other patients and special precautions may be required, i.e. using gloves and gowns.
- Medical equipment should be dedicated to the positive patient only.
- Thorough cleaning and sanitizing of all equipment and hand contact surfaces.

*Adapted from the Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors*

**For more information,  
contact your local  
public health inspector  
or call 1-800-461-1818.**

