

Patient information

Vancomycin-resistant Enterococci (VRE)

What are vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE)?

Enterococci are bacteria (germs) that live in the gut of most people and generally do not cause any harm.

When the enterococci are resistant to vancomycin (an antibiotic) it is referred to as vancomycin-resistant enterococci or VRE for short. VRE are resistant to certain antibiotics (glycopeptide antibiotics), namely vancomycin and teicoplanin.

Can VRE be harmful?

People may have VRE on their body without causing any harm. This is called colonisation (a person is said to be a 'carrier'). Patients who are colonised do not require any treatment although special precautions may be taken to prevent the risk of spread to other vulnerable patients (see below).

Occasionally VRE cause infection and make people feel sick. VRE can cause wound infections, infections of the blood (bacteraemia), abdomen and urine.

For the majority of patients, VRE does not cause any problems.

Who is at risk of VRE infection?

VRE infections are rare. Infections occur mostly in patients, particularly those who:

- have a weakened immune system
- have been in contact with a person carrying VRE
- have had previous treatment with antibiotics including vancomycin and teicoplanin

- had a prolonged hospital stay
- have had major surgery, are on treatment for cancer or have long-term illnesses
- have had medical devices, for example, urinary or central intravenous catheters, which have been in place for a long time.

Some patients may already have VRE before they are admitted to hospital. In these cases the source of VRE is usually unknown.

Are VRE infections treatable?

If you have a VRE infection, you will be treated with antibiotics other than vancomycin and teicoplanin.

However, if you are only colonised with VRE no treatment is required.

How did I get VRE?

It can be difficult to say exactly how you got VRE. There are two ways by which spread can occur:

- VRE may spread from the patient's own gut, to other parts of their body
- VRE may pass from one patient to another either through direct contact or by indirect contact, for example, from touching surfaces.

How can the spread of VRE be prevented?

If you are colonised or infected with VRE you may need to be moved to a single room to prevent the spread of VRE to other patients. Staff will be required to adhere to strict infection control precautions:

- Medical staff can help by restricting the use of antibiotics – especially vancomycin, teicoplanin and cephalosporins – to those patients who really need them.
- Thorough cleaning of the hospital environment and appropriate decontamination of equipment is vital in preventing the spread of many organisms.
- All hospital staff and visitors should wash hands before and after visiting a patient.
- Everyone should wash their hands regularly, particularly after going to the toilet.
- Staff caring for you will wear personal protective equipment, such as gloves and an apron, to prevent the spread of the bacteria to other patients.

Patients with VRE can also help by:

- informing staff immediately if they develop diarrhea
- washing their hands regularly and thoroughly

Can I have visitors?

It is quite safe for friends and family to visit. The general advice for hospital visitors is as follows.

- Relatives, friends and other people who are feeling unwell should not visit you.
- Visitors who have had a recent infection or illness should ask the nursing staff on the ward for advice before visiting.
- Children and babies can be more vulnerable to infection. Please ask the nursing staff on the ward or the Infection Prevention and Control team whether visiting is advisable.
- Follow any instructions from nursing staff before visiting.
- Visitors and relatives can still touch you, for example, hold your hand or give you a hug. Your family members do not have to wear gloves and aprons unless they are helping you with your personal care. Visitors should not sit or lie on your bed when visiting.
- Visitors must wash their hands well with soap and water before and after visiting to help prevent the bacteria from spreading to other people.

What happens when I am ready to be discharged from hospital?

Being colonised with VRE should not affect your discharge. If you are going to another hospital or nursing home, your nursing or medical team will let them know your VRE status so that appropriate precautions may be taken to prevent it spreading to other patients.

No special precautions are required once you are home. Good hygiene practice should continue at home, it is important to continue to wash your hands thoroughly after using the toilet and before preparing and eating meals.

Household cleaning can be carried out as normal and laundry can be washed in the usual way.

Where can I get further information about VRE?

For further information about VRE, please speak to any member of the ward

staff caring for you. If they are unable to answer your questions, or if you require further information, the Infection Prevention and Control nurses will visit you on the ward. Ask your ward nurse to contact them via the hospital switchboard.

The information in this leaflet is based on guidance published by the Health Protection Agency.

Further information can be found on the Public Health England website at www.gov.uk/enterococcus-species-and-glycopeptide-resistant-enterococci-gre

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