

Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci (VRE)

Patient information and frequently asked questions

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What are enterococci?

Enterococci are bugs (bacteria) that normally live harmlessly in your gut and are excreted in faeces (poo). This is called colonisation and the person is referred to as being a carrier. Enterococci usually do not make you sick, however sometimes they can cause infections in the blood stream, urinary tract, and wounds.

What is VRE?

When someone has an infection, antibiotics may be needed to kill the bacteria causing the infection. Vancomycin is a type of antibiotic used to treat enterococci infections. Some strains of enterococci become resistant to vancomycin (known as VRE), and vancomycin will no longer kill these bacteria. Infections caused by VRE can be difficult to treat as there are a limited number of antibiotic treatments available.

How did I get VRE?

As this type of bacteria can be found living harmlessly in your gut, it is difficult to know when or how they entered your body. However, there is an increased chance of picking up the bacteria if you have:

- spent a long time in hospital or have had frequent hospital admissions
- needed intensive unit care, dialysis, or an organ transplant
- cancer
- needed a lot of antibiotic treatment
- shared a hospital room with someone who has VRE.

How do I know if I have VRE?

VRE does not make people unwell. Certain tests are sometimes needed while you are in hospital and these tests can also show if you have VRE. Having VRE does not mean you are ill, only that you are colonised (are a carrier). If healthcare staff think you may have VRE, a test will be needed to confirm a positive or negative result. This test is either done through testing your poo or a rectal swab.

How does spread of VRE happen?

VRE can spread within healthcare settings from one person to another through touching surfaces, patient equipment or from a person's hands that have been contaminated with the bacteria and not cleaned properly.

How can spread of VRE be prevented?

Making sure your hands are kept clean is really important. Healthcare staff will be washing their hands regularly too. In hospitals, cleaning and disinfection of surfaces and equipment can help stop VRE spread.

If you are admitted to hospital with known VRE from a previous test, or if the healthcare staff think you may have VRE, you will need to be cared for in a single room that has its own bathroom or toilet or commode. Sometimes, if there are other patients with VRE in the same ward as you, it is safe to care for those people together in the same area as you all have the same bug.

Staff will need to take extra precautions such as wearing gloves and a gown. There will be a sign on your door to remind people of what they need to do before coming in and leaving. While you are in hospital, you will be asked to stay in your room unless there are specific reasons that you need to leave your room. This is to stop accidental spread to others.

What will visitors need to do?

Whānau and other people visiting you in hospital will need to clean their hands before they come into your room and again when they leave. If they are helping you with any of your hygiene needs, they may need to wear an apron and gloves. Hospital staff will advise them on this.

What will happen when I leave hospital?

If you need to go to another healthcare facility or you require further care from district nurses or home hospital services, let staff know you have (or have had) VRE as precautions may still be needed. This is to prevent the healthcare staff from picking up VRE and spreading it to others. Good handwashing is very important to reduce the risk of spread.

How can I protect my whānau/family/household members from getting VRE when I go home from hospital?

The most important thing to do is to practice good hand hygiene. Wash your hands with soap and water and dry them thoroughly after you go to the bathroom and before preparing any food. If people need to help you at home, remind them to wash their hands regularly too.

You should also:

- Keep any wounds, cuts or grazes clean and covered until healed.
- Keep bathroom, toilet and flush handle, benchtops and surfaces clean.
- Use your own towels or washcloths, don't share with others.
- Follow any advice given to you by healthcare staff.

No special requirements are needed for washing clothes, bedding and towels, or cups, plates, or cutlery. You can wash these items as normal using regular washing liquids and laundry detergents.

Will VRE go away?

The length of time a person carries VRE will vary between people. This means you may need to be re-screened (tested) if you are admitted to hospital in the future.

What if I am admitted to hospital again or need to see another doctor?

On any future admissions to hospital, you may be placed in a single room and the same precautions may be used again by the staff looking after you. You may need to have tests again to see if you have VRE, but this will be explained to you. Even if special precautions are no longer required, such as gowns and glove use, you may be cared for in a single room and checked regularly to make sure that the VRE does not come back.

If you go to another doctor or nurse at a surgery or clinic or have a new caregiver, tell them that you needed special precautions for VRE when you were in hospital. This will allow them to use precautions to make sure that they do not carry the organism to other patients. You do not need to tell anybody else.