



Vibrio bacterial disease

Centre for Disease Control Fact sheet

What are Vibrio bacteria?

Vibrio bacteria are a family of bacteria that live in warm sea water. They are found throughout the world but are particularly common in large gulfs in tropical areas such as the Bay of Bengal, the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of Carpentaria. There are several species of Vibrio that cause disease, one of which is *Vibrio cholerae* which causes cholera. Vibrio bacteria can live freely in sea water but can also contaminate seafood, particularly shellfish.

Who gets diseases caused by Vibrios?

People with poor immunity, particularly those with chronic liver disease, can get the infection through the skin, when cuts or abrasions are exposed to sea water, or through ingesting contaminated food or water. The infection can start as a wound infection and can quickly spread to cause overwhelming and life-threatening bloodstream infection. Once established, bloodstream infection with Vibrio bacteria has a 50% mortality even with the best treatment.

If healthy people eat food contaminated with Vibrios they can get gastro symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhoea. This is usually self-limiting although can be severe depending on the type of Vibrio and the person's immunity.

Where do people get infected?

The bacteria are found in tropical waters and so can potentially be acquired anywhere along the north Australian coast. However, the reported

serious infections in the NT were all acquired in the sea or rivers around the south-western shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria – near the Sir Edward Pellew Group and Limmen Bight. Fortunately, severe infections with Vibrio are rare. Since 2000 there have been only 4 serious infections of people in the Northern Territory.

How can you prevent disease from Vibrio bacteria?

Everyone who comes into contact with waters from rivers, estuaries or gulf should observe the following tips;

- Avoid exposure of open wounds or broken skin to sea or river water.
- Thoroughly cook all seafood caught in coastal and estuarine waters.
- Do not eat any raw oysters or other raw shellfish.
- Avoid contaminating other food when handling raw shellfish.

In addition to the above pre-cautions, anyone with compromised immune systems, particularly those with any form of liver disease should observe the following tips;

- Do not swim in the rivers estuaries or sea, particularly in and around the Gulf of Carpentaria.
- Minimise all contact with tropical coastal sea water, particularly in and around the Gulf of Carpentaria.
- Promptly treat any wound which becomes infected following exposure to tropical waters and seek medical advice if the infection is worsening.

For more information, contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control (CDC)

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