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VRE, patient information

County Medical Officers' infection prevention sheet

What is VRE?

VRE stands for "vancomycin-resistant enterococci". Vancomycin is an antibiotic that is used to treat severe infections caused by enterococci, among other things. VRE are enterococci that have become resistant to vancomycin. VRE are therefore significantly more difficult to treat **if** they cause an infection. Enterococci are bacteria that are normally present in the intestine. Everyone has bacteria in their intestines, referred to as the normal intestinal flora. They are needed to digest food and are important to the immune system. VRE are intestinal bacteria that can be part of the intestinal flora for a short or long period of time.

Are there risks associated with VRE?

The biggest risk associated with antibiotic-resistant bacteria is not getting the right antibiotics to treat an infection. Most individuals with VRE have them in the intestines without being sick and are referred to as **carriers**. Being a carrier is not a disease and does not require treatment. VRE does not cause illness more frequently than other enterococci. Infections showing symptoms are rare and affect mostly the elderly or people with lower resistance to infection. They are usually urinary tract infections or infections from a wound – rarely serious infections. **If** VRE do cause **infection**, special antibiotics must be used. That sometimes requires hospital care rather than just taking tablets at home.

How are VRE spread?

The bacteria are spread via the hands after a visit to the toilet, for example. In healthcare facilities, VRE can be transferred between patients, primarily via the hands. VRE can also remain on surfaces in bathrooms or patient rooms. For a person to become a carrier of VRE, they must enter the body through the mouth.

Is it possible to get rid of VRE?

Since VRE become part of the normal intestinal flora, a person can carry them for a long time (months to years). It is not possible to predict how long a particular person will be a carrier of the bacteria, but most people are likely to get rid of them over time. It is not usually necessary to check a stool sample.

What should you bear in mind?

- Hand hygiene is just as important as it always has been. Wash your hands with soap and water after visiting the toilet and before cooking food/eating meals. Liquid soap is always preferable.
- You do not need to inform anyone around you that you are a carrier of VRE.
- You can live your life as usual and spend time with others. You can also continue your normal sex life.
- If you have a wound, urinary catheter or stoma, it is particularly important that you wash your hands after changing bandages/dressing it. You should also shower instead of taking a bath in a bathtub/pool.
- If you have diarrhoea or faecal leakage, you should also shower instead of taking a bath in a bathtub/pool.
- If you require antibiotic treatment, it is vital that you get the right kind of antibiotics and that a bacterial culture is taken. For your own sake, we therefore ask you to inform your doctor about your carrier status/previous infection.

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- If you are admitted to hospital, are to undergo surgery or are in sheltered accommodation, it is a good idea to inform the doctor that you have VRE.
- In healthcare facilities and sheltered accommodation it is particularly important to have good hygiene and cleaning procedures in place to prevent the spread of bacteria.