



VRE patient information leaflet

What are VRE?

VRE are bacteria (bugs) that live in the bowel. VRE is short for Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci, but we will use only the short name – VRE – in this leaflet.

VRE are resistant to many antibiotics which are used to treat infections. This means they are harder to kill with antibiotics than other common bugs that live in the bowel. Sometimes, these bugs that are resistant to antibiotics are called 'superbugs'.

For most people most of the time, VRE live harmlessly in the bowel and does not cause infection. However, VRE can cause serious infection in some patients – for example, when they need intensive care or when they're having chemotherapy. If you get a VRE infection, it can be treated with special antibiotics, because the common antibiotics will not work. If you get a serious infection with VRE, doctors need to know as soon as possible so that you get the right antibiotics straight away.

How did I get VRE?

VRE is much more common than it was 20 years ago. Because it is now so common, there is usually no way of telling where and when you picked it up. You might have had VRE in your bowel for months or even years before you had a test that showed you had VRE. This is because, in most people, VRE lives harmlessly in the bowel for a long time.

Twenty years ago, VRE was rare except in people who spent a lot of time in hospital. Now, VRE is very common in people who spend a lot of time in hospital. It can also be found in some people who have not spent time in hospital.

What are the symptoms of VRE?

As long as VRE stays in the bowel it does not cause an illness. It does not cause diarrhoea or stomach pains. However, if the VRE gets into the bladder, kidney or blood, it can cause infection. When this happens, the person will often get a temperature, pain and shivering that feels the same as if they had any other infection. If you need treatment, many of the ordinary antibiotics do not work. Your doctor will have to give you special antibiotics to treat the VRE infection.



How long will I have VRE?

VRE can live in your bowel for months or even years. If you do not have to take antibiotics for a long time, you increase the chance that it will fade away. If you need to take antibiotics often, it will take VRE longer to clear.

How can I reduce the spread of VRE?

The best way to stop spread of all bugs and viruses is to keep the toilet rim and seat clean and to clean your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet and before eating.

If you go to hospital, you will notice that the staff will be especially careful to clean their hands after they have been caring for you. Sometimes they will wear aprons and gloves. Also, you may be given a single room if it's possible. These steps are taken to help reduce the spread of VRE. If you know you are carrying a superbug, it is important to tell a member of staff when you come to hospital.

What happens when I go home?

VRE is not dangerous for people who are in fairly good health. You do not need to do anything different from anyone else as you go about your normal life at home and when you're out and about. Clothes, bed linen and dishes can be washed as usual. Just as for everybody else, though, we recommend that you are careful about cleaning your hands thoroughly. Everyone should clean their hands before eating or preparing food. Clean hands protect you and others from the spread of most bugs, not just VRE.

Following good hand hygiene practice all the time helps to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses. When you use the toilet, it is really important that you leave the toilet clean and in the condition that you would like to find it.

Further information

Please do not hesitate to ask the healthcare staff caring for you if you have any questions, or if you require more information about VRE. Information on hand hygiene, infection control and managing superbugs at home is available on www.hse.ie/infectioncontrol or on www.hpsc.ie

This information is approved for use by the HSE's Antimicrobial Resistance and Infection Control national programme. Text awarded Plain English mark from the National Adult Literacy Agency

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