

Vibrio bacterial disease

Vibrio bacteria are a family of bacteria that live in sea water – preferring warm sea water.

They are found throughout the world but are particularly common in large gulfs in tropical areas such as the Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Australia.

There are several species of Vibrio that cause disease, one of which is *Vibrio cholerae* which causes cholera. Vibrio bacteria typically live in sea water but can also contaminate seafood, particularly shellfish such as oysters.

Who gets diseases caused by Vibrio bacteria

People can get vibrio infections either through skin contact (skin cuts or wounds that are exposed to sea water), or through eating/drinking food or water that has been contaminated with vibrio bacteria.

People at greatest risk of getting sick are those with poor immunity (particularly those with liver disease) and those who live/work in coastal sea water.

The infection can start as a wound infection and can quickly spread to cause life-threatening bloodstream infection. Once in the bloodstream, infection with Vibrio bacteria has a 50% mortality even with the best treatment.

If healthy people eat food contaminated with vibrio bacteria they can get gastro symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhoea. These symptoms usually settle without treatment, although can be severe depending on the type of Vibrio and the person's immune system.

Where do people get infected

Vibrio bacteria are found in tropical waters and so can potentially be acquired anywhere along the north Australian coast.

Most serious infections reported in the Northern Territory 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 12 serious cases in the Northern Territory.

Prevention

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

- avoid exposure of open wounds or broken skin to sea or river water (if exposed, wash the wound with soap and clean 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 precautions, 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.

Contact

For more information contact the [Centre for Disease Control](#) in your region.

Location	Phone
Darwin (Top End Region)	(08) 8922 8044 o 1800 008 002
Katherine (Big Rivers Region)	(08) 8973 9049
Tennant Creek (Central Australia Region)	(08) 8962 4259
Alice Springs (Central Australia Region)	(08) 8951 7540
Nhulunbuy (East Arnhem Region)	(08) 8987 0357