



# Living with **VRE**

Learning how to control the spread of  
Vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE)

**IMPORTANT**

VRE is a serious infection that may become life-threatening if left untreated. If you or someone in your family has been diagnosed with VRE, there are steps you can take **now** to avoid spreading it to your family and friends.

This booklet was developed to help you understand and manage your VRE infection. Follow the recommendations and practice good hygiene to take care of yourself. VRE may cause physical pain and emotional stress, but keep in mind that it can be managed. For more information on your VRE infection, please contact your health care provider.

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### **What is Vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE)?**

*Enterococci* (pronounced En-te-ro-kok-si) are bacteria normally present in the human intestines and are often found in health care settings. These bacteria can sometimes cause infections. Vancomycin (pronounced Van-ko-my-cin) is an antibiotic (medicine) that is often used to treat infections caused by *enterococci*. In some cases, *enterococci* have become resistant to vancomycin and are called vancomycin-resistant *enterococci* or VRE. More VRE infections occur among people who are hospitalized, but people may still have the infection after they leave the health care facility.

### **What type of infection does VRE cause?**

VRE can live in the human intestines without causing disease. This is known as being colonized with VRE. However, sometimes VRE can be the cause of infections of the urinary tract, bloodstream, or in wounds.

### **How do I know if I have VRE?**

If your doctor thinks you have a VRE infection, he or she will collect blood, urine or fluid from a wound for testing. He or she will want to know if the strain of bacteria infecting you is resistant to vancomycin.

### **If I get VRE, will I always have it?**

People with an active infection can be treated with an antibiotic (medicine) and the infection may go away. People that are colonized with VRE may have it for a long time. Talk to your health care provider for more information.

### **How is VRE spread from one person to another?**

VRE is passed from person to person most commonly by people whose hands have become contaminated by stool, urine, or fluid from a wound of a person infected or colonized with the bacteria. It can also spread by touching contaminated surfaces where the germs can survive for weeks. If someone touches the surface before it is cleaned and disinfected, they may get VRE. Washing your hands and keeping surfaces clean is the best way to prevent the spread of VRE.

### **What if I have VRE while I am in a health care facility?**

If you know you have VRE, please let the health care staff know immediately so they can provide the appropriate care. Most health care facilities are aware of the risk of VRE during a patient stay. The facility may follow special guidelines for VRE infections.

### What is the treatment for VRE?

Most VRE infections can be treated with antibiotics (medicine) other than vancomycin. If you have a VRE infection and have a urinary catheter, sometimes removing the catheter can get rid of the infection. If you have a VRE blood infection and an IV line, the line may need to be removed.

People colonized with VRE will usually not require treatment, but you may still spread VRE if you do not practice good hand hygiene.

### How can the spread of VRE be prevented in health care facilities?

Doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals should:

- Wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before and after caring for every patient. This will prevent VRE from being passed from patient to patient. Please ask your doctors, nurses and other health care workers to wash their hands before they care for you.
- Put on gloves and wear a gown over their clothing when caring for a patient with VRE.
- Remove their gown and gloves and wash their hands before leaving the room of a patient with VRE.
- Make sure that patient rooms and medical equipment are thoroughly cleaned before being used by other patients.

What patients and visitors can do to prevent spread:

- Patients and visitors should wash their hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially after using the bathroom and before eating.
- As recommended by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), patients with VRE should stay in their rooms and follow special precautions.
- Patients with VRE should not go to “common” areas of the facility such as the cafeteria and gift shop. You may be asked to shower and/or change to a fresh, clean gown before leaving your room to go into other areas of the hospital.
- Visitors should check in with the nurse’s station prior to entering the patient’s room, follow the nurse’s instructions, and always wash their hands before entering the room and before leaving the room.

### How can I prevent spreading VRE (and other germs) at home?

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially after using the bathroom, before preparing food and before eating.
- If water is unavailable, alcohol-based hand sanitizer may be used when hands are not visibly soiled.
- Only use towels once for drying your hands or use disposable towels.
- Wear disposable gloves if you expect to come into contact with stool, urine or bandages from infected wounds. Wash your hands after removing and disposing of used gloves.
- Frequently clean areas of your home, such as your bathroom, that may become contaminated with VRE.
- Keep wound dressings clean and dry.
- Change and wash linens on a regular basis, or any time they are soiled.
- Always notify health care providers if you are infected or colonized with VRE or have been in the past.

### What is good hand hygiene?

Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds (or two verses of the 'Happy Birthday' song) with soap and water:

- After using the toilet or helping someone use the toilet.
- After touching dirty surfaces and handling soiled laundry.
- After handling items soiled by body fluids.
- Before and after preparing meals/snacks.
- Before eating meals.
- Before and after taking or giving medications.
- After caring for a sick person.
- After touching pets.
- After sneezing, coughing, or blowing your nose.
- Any time hands are visibly dirty.

### What is the proper way to wash my hands?

- Wet your hands with warm, running water.
- Add soap and rub hands together, front and back including wrists and between fingers for 20 seconds. Clean under fingernails.
- Rinse the soap from your hands.
- Dry your hands with a clean towel.
- As an alternative, when hands are not visibly soiled, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Follow the directions on the label.

**What is the proper way to clean?**

People without diarrhea are much less likely to spread germs into the environment. However, if diarrhea occurs, use a bleach-containing cleaner for the bathroom and high touch areas. If using bleach alone, then follow the directions on the label – generally one part bleach to ten parts water (1:10 solution) made fresh daily. Never mix bleach with other cleaners.

- Wet the surface well and clean vigorously.
- Allow the surface to air dry.
- Pay special attention to areas that may be soiled with stool, such as the toilet (don't forget the flush handle) and sink, and areas that are touched frequently, such as door knobs and light switches.

**What is the proper way to wash clothes and other fabrics?**

Wash the clothing of the person with VRE separate from other laundry to prevent the germs from getting on other clothing. Wash clothes/fabrics separately if they are heavily soiled with stool and/or body fluids:

- Rinse off stool in toilet.
- Use the hot water cycle with soap; use bleach when fabric appropriate.
- Dry items in the dryer on high heat, if possible.

**What is the proper way to clean dishes?**

For regular cleaning, use of the dishwasher or hand washing with soap and water is very effective. Some people prefer to final-rinse their dishes and utensils in a diluted bleach solution of one tablespoon bleach in one gallon of water, and allow them to air dry.

**Shopping List**

These items can be found at most drug stores or grocery stores:

- Disposable gloves
- Tissues
- Soap
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Disinfectant
- Bleach
- Plastic trash bags

## **Things to remember about living with VRE:**

1. Wash your hands often, especially after using the bathroom and before preparing food.
2. Wear gloves if your hands may come in contact with body fluids or stool.
3. Frequently clean areas of the home, especially your bathrooms that may have been contaminated with VRE.
4. Inform all your health care providers if you have been diagnosed with VRE so they may take the appropriate precautions when caring for you.
5. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about your VRE infection.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

### **Arizona Healthcare Associated Infections (HAI) Program**

**[www.preventHAIaz.gov](http://www.preventHAIaz.gov)**

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Their work was guided by the best available evidence at the time this document was created. The objectives of the PES are directed at providing access to infection prevention resources for the public.

